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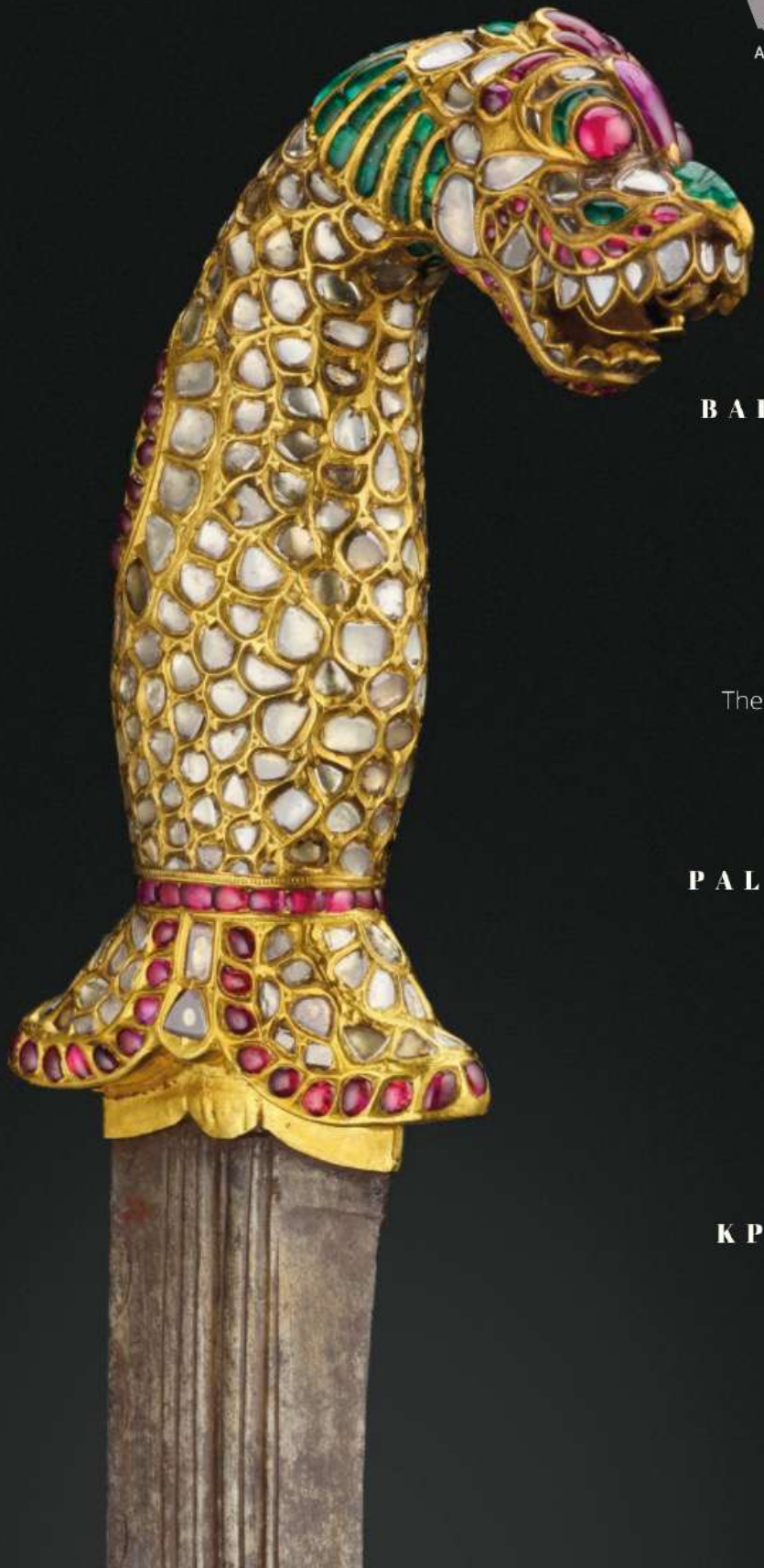

BARADWAJ RAMAN ON S BALACHANDER'S VEENA

OF GIFTED VOICE

The life and music of MS Subbulakshmi
by Keshav Desiraju

PALGHAT MANI IYER'S MUSICAL LEGACY

A conversation with
Palghat Ram Prasad

ARVIND SANKAR'S TRIBUTE TO KP KITTAPPA PILLAI

+ MORE

Yali

/Yāḷi/

noun

A mythical creature that is portrayed as part lion, part elephant and part horse, and in similar shapes

Above: Yali, Deccan, Bijapur or Gol
Cover picture art: A gold gem set hi

CONTENTS

01
Of Gifted Voice
Keshav Desiraju

15
Tanjavur KP Kittappa Pillai
Arvind Kumar Sankar

27
The musical legacy of Palghat TS Mani Iyer
Palghat Ramprasad

45
My tryst with Tanjore paintings
Veeren Koneru

59
An analysis of Raga Neelambari
Shreeraam Shankar

67
S Balachander, the phenomenon
Baradwaj Raman & Amar Ramesh

77
Who were the real Trinity of Carnatic music?
Boddapati Shivanand

87
Rangaramanuja Ayyangar, another Ekalavya
Dr. K.G. Vijayakrishnan

97
My experiments with the Mridangam
Sumesh Narayanan

105
Vaak recommends Madurai Mani Iyer
Shreyas Gowrishanker

lconda, 17th Century, Sothebys, 2019)
lted dagger (Kinjal), Christies, 2019

Summer Greetings from Vaak.

2021 hasn't been very kind to us thus far. India is facing the ire of the virus, and some of us have experienced illness and loss in this time. The story is no different at Vaak. One of us has lost a family member, and an encounter of loss at such close quarters is agonizing and painful. But what has helped us in this time is putting our heads down, working, and taking refuge in art. In the process of reading Issue *03*, we hope that you allow your mind and heart soak in these writings that we have put together.

We have chosen *Yalis* as a theme for this edition. They are a symbol of strength and vigilance, virtues essential for us to wade through this pandemic. Also, a study of perfection compels an acknowledgment that nothing can be described as perfect without having several imperfect forms. The *Yalis*, like the Gargoyles in European architecture, are also man's attempt to map the road to perfection through imperfect iconographies.

Issue *03* is a very eclectic edition, and we have tried to maintain the balance, between honoring the past by attempting to understand it and innovating in the present to keep pace with the times we live in, intact. This is a difficult equilibrium to achieve because of the multitude of forces that are involved in deciding the trajectory of art. It used to be patrons and emperors in the past; it is democracy and consumer behavior in the present. How can we embrace deep scholarship while catering to popular interests? Can we integrate these two spaces? Where does art end and social activism begin? How can we define access? These are sociological questions we are interested in understanding deeply, and this edition is in line with our spirit to take forward this enquiry.

We are deeply indebted to Vinay Jain and Jyotsna Narayanan for their light and love. Our thanks to Shrikar Giridaran, for being generous with his knowledge resources. We are also grateful to our contributors for giving us an opportunity to work with them.

Please enjoy this edition, and let us know what you think: vaak(dot)me(at)gmail

Take care,
Vaak

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Of Gifted Voice

Keshav Desiraju

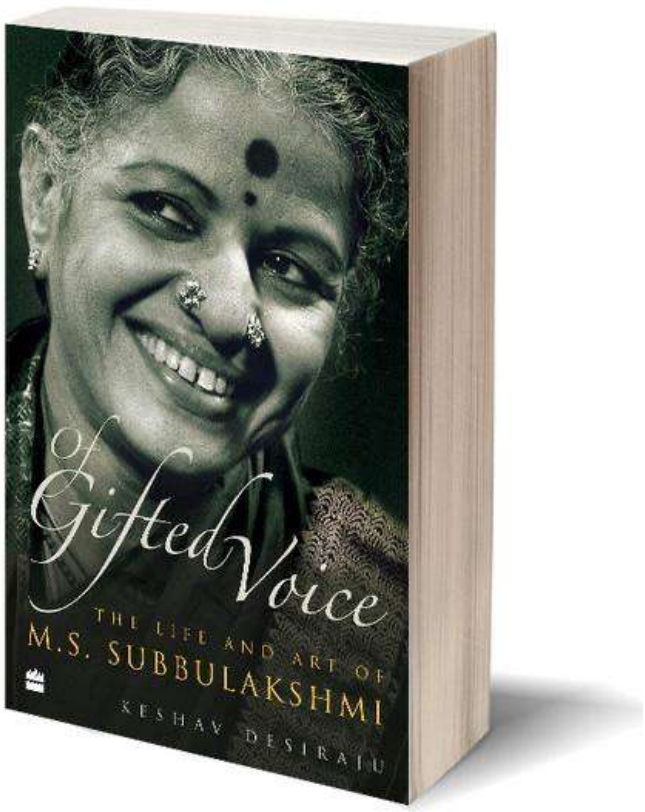
{ Excerpted with permission from HarperCollins Publishers India
from the book *Of Gifted Voice* by Keshav Desiraju }

Chapter *9*

Maestra: The Great Concert Years

The core of Subbulakshmi's repertoire was the compositions of the trinity; 'These three great men were born in the same place and were contemporaries of one another. They should be remembered for ever'. Subbulakshmi's contribution towards preserving the heritage of the three composers is to be recognized. Of course, it was what she brought to her renderings of their songs but she was also instrumental in purchasing Syama Sastri's house for `*8,000* in *1962* and Tyagaraja's house for a larger sum in *1975* and transferring both to the Tiruvarur Music Trinity Commemoration Sabha. She also contributed to the construction of a memorial to Muthusvami Dikshitar as there was no trace of the original house in Tiruvarur.

However, her repertoire itself, as that of other concert performers, included many other more contemporary composers, the most prominent being Papanasam Sivan, to whom we will return. Specific songs of Mysore Sadasiva Rao (*1805?–85*), Mysore Vasudevacharya and Jayachamaraja Wodeyar were so prominent in Subbulakshmi's repertoire that their reputation lasts along with hers, as also select songs of Patnam Subramania Iyer.



Mysore Sadasiva Rao's 'Sri Kamakoti'/Saveri is one of these songs, not that it is sung very much any more. Subbulakshmi raised the song to cult status, with high-voltage neraval at the line, 'Kadamba vana nilaye…' There are less than fifty songs of this composer of which Subbulakshmi sang 'Saketa nagara natha'/Harikambhoji and, late in life, 'Sri Shanmukha janaka'/Sankarabharanam.

Jayachamaraja Wodeyar, the last ruler of

Mysore, was an interesting and cultivated man with academic attainments in Indian philosophy and training in Western music on the piano in addition to his abilities as a composer of songs in the Carnatic tradition. Of the many pieces attributed to him, Subbulakshmi famously sang 'Ksheerasagarasayana'/ Mayamalavagaula.. The UN Concert of *1966* included 'Siva Siva Siva bho'/ Nadanamakriya and she also sang 'Chintayami jagadamba'/Hindolam and 'Sri Jalandhara'/ Gambhiranata. It is surprising that Subbulakshmi did not favour his compositions any more than she did. He was by way of being a friend and patron and his songs are in the expressive Sanskrit she sang so well. Jayachamaraja Wodeyar composed *108* songs, with ninety-four published, with very few ragas, if any, which have been repeated.

It is possible that Wodeyar was assisted in his musical composition (and the possibility of assistance cannot be ruled out even in the case of that other royal composer, Svati Tirunal of Travancore) by the celebrated Mysore Vasudevacharya, himself from the direct musical line of Tyagaraja and a composer of renown. His 'Brochevarevarura'/Khamas must be regarded as the ranking composition in that raga. The song is widely sung but Subbulakshmi's rendering conveys both radiance and clarity.

Vasudevacharya wrote about *200* songs, including varnams and javalis. Subbulakshmi actually sang very few of them. In a special radio programme, she sang the Khamas piece and 'Sri Chamundeshwari'/Bilahari, another favourite, but also 'Palukavademira'/ Devamanohari, 'Mamavatu Sri Saraswati'/Hindolam, 'Ninne Nammiti'/ Simhendramadhyamam, 'Pranatarthiharam'/Jenjuti and a Surati tillana. There is a solitary reference in the available material to 'Ra ra yani pilacite'/Kharaharapriya, sung in Secunderabad in March *1987*.

Patnam Subramania Iyer's reputation rests almost totally on the strength of his belonging to the direct line of discipleship from Tyagaraja, his teacher Manambuchavadi Venkatasubbier being one of Tyagaraja's disciples. His Telugu compositions derive entirely from Tyagaraja in their construction and language. However, even at their best, they do not carry the intensity or dexterity with language found in Tyagaraja. Several devadasi singers learnt from him, notably Lakshminarayani and Rangamma, known as the Enadi Sisters, Pappa and Radha, the daughters of Salem Meenakshi; and Dhanammal's eldest daughter T. Rajalakshmi, later to have herself been a teacher of D.K. Pattammal.

Many compositions of 'Patnam' are published with notation but comparatively

Following page
Top: At Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan's Madras residence "Girija", 19 January 1969,

Middle left: MS with Chembai Vaidhyanatha Bhagavathar, early 1950s

Middle right: MS surrounded by the audience after a concert, late 1950s

Bottom: Kalpathi Ramanathan Mridangam and Mysore T Chowdiah Violin, 1941

AIR

few are in currency. Subbulakshmi sang 'Raghuvamsasudha'/ Kadanakutuhalam with éclat, steeping in melody what could easily have become a marching song. 'Sankalpame'/ Kharaharapriya was another favourite in her middle years as were. 'Maravakave'/Sama and 'Marivere'/ Shanmukhapriya. She also sang 'Aparadhamula'/Latangi in her later years. Patnam Subramania Iyer's presence in her repertoire was, however, most famously established by the varnam in Todi, 'Era napai', which Subbulakshmi sang extremely often, and the Abhogi varnam, 'Evari bodhana'. It is, of course, true, that these varnams are sung very often by many musicians.

There are a host of other composers, whose output is less well known on the concert circuit. Tarangambadi Panchanatha Iyer who wrote 'Birana brova idey'/Kalyani, lives only on the strength of Subbulakshmi's rendering of that one particular song. Of the compositions of Ramanathapuram 'Poochi' Srinivasa Iyengar (*1860– 1919*), Subbulakshmi famously sang 'Saragunapalimpa'/Kedaragaula and also 'Rama ninne nammitini'/Saranga, 'Anudinamu'/Begada, and the varnam in Kanada, 'Nera nammitini'. Subbarama Dikshitar (*1839– 1906*) was primarily a musicologist but of his many compositions Subbulakshmi sang 'Sankaracharyam'/Sankarabharanam very often. Late in her career, she presented his Telugu song 'Parthasarathi ni sevimpani' in Yadukulakambhoji. Alone among his compositions, Tirupati Narayanaswami Naidu's 'Ikanaina' in Pushpalatika has had any sort of

MS at sharing the stage with Mayuram Govindaraja Pillai playing the Violin, and Kalpathi on the Mridangam, early 1940s

MS in a concert with MS Gopalakrishnan on the violin and TK Murthy on the Mridangam, 1963

popularity and was sung by many women singers and famously by Subbulakshmi. Puliyur Doraswami Iyer's 'Sarasiruhasana'/Nata was another favourite.

In later years, Subbulakshmi sang selectively of contemporary composers: 'Nidayaledani'/Dhanyasi of 'Spencer' Venugopal (born *1930*); 'Mangalavinayakane'/Ramapriya and 'Muruga muruga'/Saveri both of Periasami Thooran (*1908–87*); 'Karunaipuriya nalla tharunam'/ Sriranjani, 'Kannan idam'/ragamalika and 'Ambigaye'/Anandabhairavi, all of Ambujam Krishna (*1917–89*); and 'Vinayaka Vighnavinasaka'/ Hamsadhwani of Ra. Ganapathi (*1935–2012*). It is entirely likely that she learnt the songs of other composers as well, even if they were not often aired from the concert stage, such as Andavan Pichai's 'Sharade' and V. Raghavan's 'Kerala dharani', both in Mohana. It is believed, for instance, that she studied the songs of T. Lakshmana Pillai (*1864–1950*) but these are not known from the available concert lists.

Possibly the most significant of contemporary composers, not just as represented in Subbulakshmi's repertoire but in the wider world of the form itself, is Sangitha Kalanidhi Papanasam Sivan. She sang his songs through her performing career, starting with those he wrote for her in Sevasadanam, Sakuntalai and Savitri. It is likely that she learnt these directly from him, as well as other songs not meant for the screen but for the concert stage, so much

so that an unpleasant rumour has persisted that Papanasam Sivan was prevented from teaching anyone else the songs he taught Subbulakshmi.

Over the years, Subbulakshmi frequently sang 'Paratpara'/ Vachaspati, 'Gajavadana'/Sriranjani, 'Kartikeya'/Todi, 'Saravanabhava'/ Shanmukhapriya, 'Narayana divya namam'/Mohana, 'Devi neeye thunai'/ Kiravani and 'Saravanabhava'/Madhyamavati. Concerts in her early career featured 'Paramukham'/Kharaharapriya, 'Tamadamen'/Todi, 'Kana kann kodi'/Kambhoji, 'Madayai'/Vasanta, 'Ikaparam'and 'Guha saravanabhava' both in Simhendramadhyamam, 'Ninnarul' and 'Deviyai pujai' both in Kamavardhini, 'Saranam Ayyappa'/Mukhari and 'Kapali'/Mohana. 'Sankara dayakara'/Harikambhoji and 'Vijaya dvaraka'/Gaulipantu appeared later as did 'Srinivasa'/Hamsanandi; but if one composition of Sivan must be permanently identified with Subbulakshmi it must be 'Ka Va Va'/Varali, a song she sang beautifully, with all the restraint for which it calls.

Papanasam Sivan did much to shore up the stock of Tamil songs available for performance and is fully entitled to be called a vaggeyakara. It is not just that his language was simple, often Sanskrit-inflected, but that he had a fine sense of what made a composition concert-worthy. It is said that he was not, indeed, a great scholar of Tamil, but he knew how to communicate with the ordinary speaker of the language. Of his *2,000*-odd songs, about *800* are for the films, and another fifty in Sanskrit, again of a very simple type. Whatever his use of language may have been, Papanasam Sivan was a gifted musician with a sense of ragabhava and his songs can stand detailed extemporizing onstage.

Following page
Top: MS with her brother Shaktivel and Mysore T Chowdiah

Middle left: MS with a Tampura, 1960s

Middle right: singing with C V Narasimhan, VV Subramaniam & TK Murthy in an informal setting, mid 1960s

Bottom: in a concert with KS Narayanaswamy Possibly the first anniversary of Nehru's death, Delhi, 27 May 1965. President Radhakrishnan and Prime Minister Shastri at extreme right with Sadasivam.

Abiding faith appears to have sustained him through success and adversity. Speaking at the Music Academy in *1971*, very late in his life, he said, "The Lord then led me to the cinema. He made me see several arts. He gave me wealth and also took it away and made me suffer in penury. He made me suffer in illness and through all this He made me sing of Him again and again. He gave me position and importance. Whatever fortune I enjoyed is all His blessing … My blooming into a composer is entirely His great compassion."

Of Gifted Voice by Keshav Desiraju is available at all bookshops and at Amazon.

CHICAGO
CHICAGO

We have spoken to Keshav Desiraju for many hours, among other things, about his interest in Subbulakshmi's music. We are sharing a few select Q&As here for the benefit of those interested in learning more about his book:

***Vaak**: How would you compare the music of MS Subbulakshmi pre 1960 and post 1960? (In one of your chapters in the book, you let slip that in the 1950s a 'sameness' had set in her music performances).*

Keshav: Subbulakshmi's presentational style changed over the years as did the repertoire presented. In the book, I have written about Ramaswami R. Iyer, who identified various stages in her concert career [Page *291-2*]. The *1950s* are when she was maturing as a great artiste. The *1960s* saw her full flowering.

"Our rasika identifies the third stage in Subbulakshmi's performing career as one where she was maturing as a great artiste; the *1956* concert at Bhavani is a fine exemplar of this time with its tight structure, fast renderings and a full display of musical virtuosity. The full flowering of Subbulakshmi's musical prowess came with the early *1960s*. The ragamalika 'Bhavayami Raghuramam', or the *1966* United Nations concert in its entirety represent this stage, a time when her voice was at its most rounded, most mature and capable of the most extraordinary feeling and had not yet begun to show signs of fatigue".

***Vaak**: MS was a legendary performer for many reasons, but she was not very popular for her repertoire. Would you agree with this? Why did this popular notion come to be? And how have you addressed these ideas in the book?*

Keshav: Subbulakshmi's repertoire was indeed very large but this in itself was not unusual. Contemporary Carnatic musicians have, if anything, even larger banks of songs on which they draw. Subbulakshmi tended to stick to a limited number from among the very large number of songs she knew.

I have written about this in several places in the book, as for instance at pages *285-286* "There is, of course, a caveat to this. For all the richness of her repertoire, possibly well over *2,500* songs, *8* Subbulakshmi showed very little of it at a time. Certain pieces, tried and tested, were presented time and time again. Songs such as 'Sri Kamakoti'/Saveri, 'Ksheerasagarasayana'/ Mayamalavagaula, or 'O Rangasayee'/Kambhoji, beautiful as they are in themselves, were done to death. Very many songs were learnt for an occasion, presented in concert and never sung again. All performers will

tend to fall back on a basic stock, but in Subbulakshmi's case, the stock, even if it kept changing after every so many years, was always provokingly small. Sadasivam's insistence on deciding the concert list for every performance, and his strong views on what was concert-worthy and what was likely to appeal was, of course, responsible for this. She acquiesced, but at the cost of her musician's sense of control. Madurai Mani Iyer also endlessly repeated his favourite songs, and as in her case, seemed to have the approbation of his public. 'It is the pursuit of the perfect song that lays him open to the charge of choosing the all-too-familiar fare. His audience appears to appreciate his point. The familiar does not stale.'"

Or, at pages *287-88*. "The allegation of sameness cannot be dismissed lightly; sameness is linked to the place of the composed piece in a concert. Subbulakshmi's approach to the composed piece was similar to that of a Western classical musician: the emphasis was on an intuitive understanding of the piece and on finely honed rendition, rather than on spontaneous and ever-changing presentation. This single-minded pursuit of perfection can be understood in the context of pre-composed pieces, but in Subbulakshmi's case it extended even to those elements of musicianship where virtuosity is looked

With Kandadevi Alagiriswamy on the Violin and TK Murthy on the Mridangam.

for, as in alapana, neraval and svaraprasthara. Subbulakshmi's alapanas and neraval, while perfect, were really always the same. Even when people caught on, they were mesmerized into acceptance. It has been said of her that she 'cleverly put through all that was available in her armoury and made the audience sing along with her'. A lesser artiste could not have managed this. On rare occasions, she would offer an alapana in Vijayanagari or Ravichandrika or a similarly unfamiliar raga, or a detailed pallavi in Hemavati, but mostly it was the familiar and well-worn. In all that she attempted, she was famously risk-averse. There was never a false step, and only very seldom an adventurous one. What she offered was uniquely hers, no one else had the voice or the training or the magic to do it, but she offered it within self-imposed limits. She never offered an explanation either, and may not have been permitted to do so, but it caused distress, especially among her admirers who knew exactly of what she was capable. This was true even of her pallavi presentation." [Page *152*]

Vaak: *There are two other books about MS Subbulakshmi, but why is your work important at this time?*

Keshav: There are many books about Subbulakshmi, and there will be more. It is not for me to say that this book is particularly important but I did want to write a life which recognized that whatever else she may have been she was primarily a classical musician of the first rank. As in Page xvii, "M.S. Subbulakshmi has been portrayed in various ways, as a musician who sought and achieved an all-India appeal, as a philanthropist and benefactor of noble causes, as an icon of high south Indian style, as a woman of piety and devotion, and as a friend and associate of the good and the great. But while she was all of these, she was first and foremost a classical musician of the highest order, and it is as such that her life's work must be assessed."

DISCOGRAPHY

This is an extended discography for *Of Gifted Voice, the Life and Art of M.S. Subbulakshmi*, New Delhi: HarperCollins, *2021* by Keshav Desiraju.

Part *1:* Krishna Gana Sabha,
Madras, *1970*

Of this period in Subbulakshmi's career, the author writes: "The season saw a stunningly imaginative recital at the Krishna Gana Sabha. This recital began predictably enough with 'Entoprema' Varnam famed in the school of Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer, 'Vatapi' and 'Naradamuni' but went on to include Svati Tirunal's 'Jaya Jaya Padmanabhanujesha', 'Cheta Sri Balakrishnam', an extremely surprising 'Devi jagajjanani', one of Svati Tirunal's Navaratri kirtanas, a lively 'Nenaruncinanu' and a ragam-tanam-pallavi in Mayamalavagaula. The concert sent out a message. Subbulakshmi was still capable of the imagination, the exactitude and the style to perform in high Ariyakudi Margam, but sadly, only when she was permitted to do so"

Part *2*: Muthusvami Dikshitar bicentenary celebrations,
Shanmukhananda Hall, Bombay, *1975*

Vocal: M S Subbulakshmi
Vocal Support: Radha Viswanathan
Violin: V V Subramanyam
Mridangam: Karaikudi Mani
Ghatam: V Nagarajan

"More significantly, two great recitals, entirely of the compositions of Muthusvami Dikshitar, were given by Subbulakshmi in the course of *1975*. The foremost representatives of the performing form appeared at carefully curated events in Bombay and Madras. Subbulakshmi's Bombay concert at the grand Shanmukhananda Hall in March *1975* was sponsored by the National Centre forthe Performing Arts with the December concert being at the Music Academy, Madras. The Bombay concert list makes impressive reading with familiar and unusual songs alike, including 'Vatapi'/Hamsadhwani, the luminous 'Veena pustaka dharini'/Vegavahini, a learning from T. Brinda sung as it is in the traditional style of that school, 'Minakshi' in Gamakakriya, both

the Anandabhairavi and Todi Navavarana kritis, 'Sadasivam upasmahe'/ Sankarabharanam, 'Hariharaputram'/Vasanta, the appropriate vaara kriti for the day, 'Divakara tanujam'/ Yadukulakambhoji, 'Ranganayakam'/Nayaki, 'Sri Parvati'/Bauli, the evergreen 'Rangapura vihara'/ Brindavanasaranga, 'Gange mam pahi'/Jenjuti and 'Mamava Pattabhirama'/ Manirangu."

The author goes on to say that "(t)he December recital in Madras was, if anything, even more beautifully structured". Several songs from this concert have been commercially released under the title Guru Guha Vani but the thoughtless manner in which the editing of songs has been done, and the inclusion of songs from other concerts, do little justice to what was a magnificent concert.

Part 3: SITRA Auditorium, Coimbatore, *1967*

A special function organised to celebrate M.S.Subbulakshmi' s successful tour of the U.S.A. Sourced from the collections of James Rubin.

Vocal: M S Subbulakshmi
Vocal Support: Radha Viswanathan
Violin: Kandadevi S.Azhagiriswami
Mridangam: T.K.Murti
Ghatam: T.H.Vinayakaram
Tambura: Vijaya Rajendran

Of this concert the author writes that: "The items were all familiar, 'Tera Tiyaga Rada'/Gaulipantu, Kavikumjara Bharati's 'Taye Idu Taranum'/Kamavardhini, 'Ninnu Vina'/Navarasakannada, 'Thiruvadi Charanam'/ Kambhoji, 'Teliyaleru'/Dhenuka, 'Narayana Divya Namam'/Mohana and 'Ka Va Va'/Varali among others, but the artiste is in fine voice and in full control".

Keshav Desiraju was educated at the universities of Bombay, Cambridge and Harvard and worked in the civil service. He is a co-editor, with Samiran Nundy and Sanjay Nagral, of 'Healers or Predators? Healthcare Corruption in India', Oxford University Press, 2018. He lives in Chennai and is thinking about upgrading his Telugu before writing about Tyagaraja.

The great Gurus of Bharatanatyam
Tanjavur K.P. Kittappa Pillai

Arvind Kumar Sankar

Sathir Aattam is a traditional dance form of South India practiced and nurtured by the Devadasis. The Nattuvanars were the gurus and the guardians of this art form for two reasons. First, they nurtured and innovated within the scope of this dance, and second, they passed on this intangible heritage down their Parampara. They were also conservative teachers and they had very clear expectations from their students.

From the *18th* century, Sathir Aatam also underwent a lot of changes, thanks to the political and social developments of that time. Infact, between *1920* and *1950*, the artform was the subject of many debates and controversies. A bill in *1947* was passed to abolish the Devadasi system and tremendous efforts were made to reconstruct this artform to give it the kind of sophistication that was palatable to the upper-class Madras audience. It is beyond the scope of this article to delve into the political origins of the current form, but it is best to say that Sathir was rechristened as Bharatanatyam, and many changes to the practice and performance of this artform accompanied the reconstruction.

While Bharatanatyam was performed on stage to a theatre audience, Sathir Aatam was performed in temples and royal courts where the seating arrangements were totally different. Also, Sathir performances comprised of Mallaris and Navasandhi Kouthuvams which were performed during processions. The confinement of space to a stage compelled the changes that had to be made.

A Sathir performance, possibly from the 19th century

Following page
Kittappa with Pandanallur Meenakshisundaram Pillai and Padmalochana

Hence the reconstructed Bharatanatyam performance had to arrive at a new format called Margam. The structure format was

1. Alarippu
2. Jathiswaram
3. Sabdam
4. Varnam
5. Padams, Javalis and Viruttams
6. Thillana.

The authors of the Margam were the Tanaji Nalvar or the Tanjore Quartet : Chinnaiah, Ponnaiah, Sivanandan and Vadivelu. They lived in the early *19th* century and their descendants patronised the art by strictly adhering to the set format of the Margam.

The Nattuvanar were great teachers, but most of them never got up and danced. They sat cross legged on the floor and gesticulated to teach the most complicated of foot works. They were also experts in taking a jathi or a konakol sollukattu to string them together into unique, sophisticated korvais. This act of creating korvais were also tailor-made for each student, like stringing a strand of pearls in measurement to make them aptly sit on a person's neck. Over a period of time, some of these unique skillsets of the Nattuvanars led to the creation of distinct schools or Banis in Bharatanatyam. Among the various Banis that evolved, the Tanjavur Bani is considered to be one of the finest. A very important torchbearer of this style was Guru and Nattuvanar, K.P.S Kittappa Pillai.

Kittappa Pillai was the fifth generation descendant of Sivanandam, one of the Tanjore Quartet, and the grandson of the legendary Meenakshisundaram Pillai, the flagbearer of the Pandanainallur popularly referred to as the Pandanallur Bani. If you notice Kittappa Pillai's creations, you can notice that he is influenced a lot by the Pandanallur bani. Despite this influence, his style was distinct. To point out a few differences, Kittappa Pillai adhered to the strict framework of the style like his maternal grandfather did but he also added a little frills outside of it. The creativity and expressions were slightly outside the Natakadarani and hence could be enhanced, enriching the entire performance.

For example, when his students performed the varnam Rupamujoochi in raga

Todi by Muthuswamy Dikshitar, he added a new prelude to this song. He showed a heroine with a flower basket performing aarthi outside the temple sanctum, right at the moment when the curtains went up. Some of these moments were subtly and tastefully added. These became unique to his style of choreography.

He innovated quite a bit within the margam itself. He was the first to compose an alarippu in many different talams by varying the thathakaram. According to the musicologist Ravichandhira, "thathakaram is a tamil expression used most commonly amongst Tavil and Nagaswaram artists when referring to a rhythmic passage of solkattu which can be converted to a melodic passage." By changing the thathakaram, he managed to compose beautiful allarippus in tisram, chatusram, kantam, misram, and sankeernam.

To create korvais, he would take a Thavil sollukattu such as "Thaangdu Thaangdu Thaangdu Thaa ..... " and incorporate it as a Jathi (at *09:46*). He then would coin beautiful adavus to that sollukattu. Such practices were unheard off in the past.

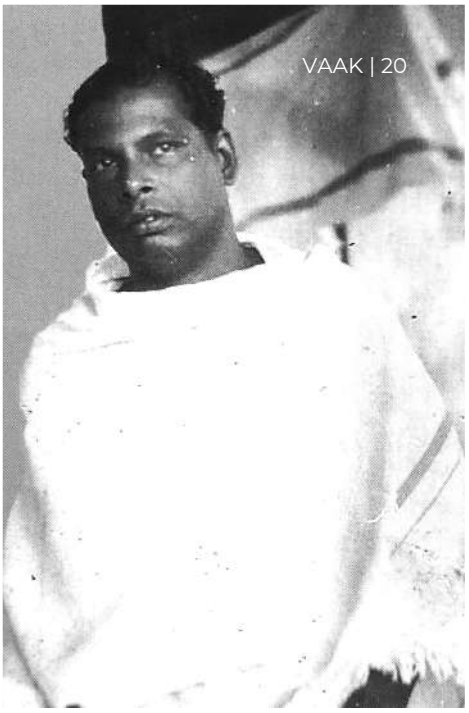
His training and understanding of Carnatic music also gave him the opportunity to have an exposure to compositions that were particularly rare to

Following page
Top left: Kittappa with his wife Vimala

Middle: Tanjore Quartet, (Sahityakalp, 2020)

Bottom right: Receiving the citation for the E. Krishna Iyer Medal from T.T. Vasu (President, Music Academy) as N. Pattabhi Raman (Sruti) looks on.

Guru Kittappa Pillai conducting the recital of Vyjayanthimala Bali outside the Sydney Opera House,
(Nartanam, 2013)



the dance repertoire. Apart from the entire list of the Tanjavur quartet varnams, he also taught some select varnams of other composers such as Muthuswamy Dikshitar, Tanjavur Quartet's guru, and Swati Tirunal, who patronized Vadivelu.

Today, the Tanjavur Bani is practiced by his students many of whom have their own dance schools. Kitappa Pillai's family continues to carry forward Bani. His son KPK Chandrasekar runs a Bharatanatyam school in Tanjavur. His granddaughter Charumathi is also a budding aspirant of this tradition.

For someone composing complex and complicated jathis, Kittappa Pillai was very soft spoken. He also had a large heart and never hesitated to share his knowledge generously with whoever came forth to learn from him.

DISCOGRAPHY

Documentary on the Tanjavur Bani of Bharatanatyam by K.P. Kittappa Pillai

Dance music performed by K.P. Kittappa Pillai's troupe

Bharatanatyam performance:

Vyjayanthimala Bali

Sudharani Raghupathi

Arvind Kumar Sankar is the Founder President of the Chinmaya Yuvakendra and the Founder Convenor of Intach Madurai Chapter. He also chairs the LAMPS trust. Arvind is a collector of antiquities and heritage artifacts. He is also the Founder Chairman of Arvind Constructions. His first book is 'Pulli Kollam and the Creative Mind' published by Palaniappa Brothers, Chennai

“ ”

Guru Sri. K. P. Kittappa Pillai (was) a multi-faceted personality. Kittappa sir was a great musician, Nattuvanar, choreographer and composer combined in one. An unassuming character he never aspired for recognition or award inspite of being a distinguished representative of the unparalleled parampara of the Tanjore Quartet.

– Dr. Sudharani Raghupathi
(KP Kittappa Pillai Centenary Souvenir, 2013)

Sudharani Ragupathi with KP Kittappa Pillai and Muthaiah Pillai

“ ”

It has been a long journey for me to be what I am today. In fact my journey has not been as one would think, smooth or easy. But I had the strong support and backing of my dear grandmother Smt.Yadugiri Devi who was from a conservative family and never even went to school, but she was a lover of the arts and it was her wish that I should become a good Bharatanatyam dancer.

Then merciful God found an outstanding Bharatanatyam Acharya for me who was none other than Guru Tanjavur K.P.S Kittapa Pillai, a direct descendant of the illustrious Tanjai Nalvar, the 4 brothers Chinnaiah, Ponnaiah, Sivanandan and Vadivelu. They were the official Natya Acharyas and Sangeetha Vidwans of the Tanjavur Brihadeeshwar Swami temple. They were responsible for codifying Bharatanatyam. My own adherence to the strict tenets of the Tanjore Bani not only enriched my repertoire, but my life as well.

Being known as Guru Tanjavur Kittapa Vadyar’s sishya was my greatest blessing. Vadyar was gentle, soft spoken, and his teaching method was unique. Vadyar helped me revive and perform some of the rare, ancient and forgotten temple dance forms. He was one of the finest Sangeetha Vidwans, and I could never take my ears off whenever he sang. Since my grandmother always believed that Sangeetha and Natya went hand in hand, it was a must for me to learn my music first from my Guru’s brother Guru K.P. Sivanand Vadyar and only then learnt my Natya from Guru Kittapa Vadyar. By God's grace, I have not only been invited to dance not only in India, but also participate in International festivals abroad, to name a few, at the United Nations General Assembly, New York, Sydney Opera House, Stockholm Festival. My revered Guru Kittapa Vadyar always accompanied me. Thank God for His benevolence, I am ever grateful

– Vyjayanthimala Bali
(Exclusively for Vaak)

“ ”

The very mention of my Guru's name takes me back to the days when he sacrificed his time and energy to accompany me to film-shooting schedules where he would instruct me on the nuances of Bharatanatyam. He had conducted my various performances in India and abroad and left his indelible style in adavus and jathis. I came to be noticed as a dancer of substance all because of his continued guidance. I sorely miss him today for he was sure to take me to greater heights in the pursuit of this great art. I am happy that Guruji's son Sri Chandrasekaran is continuing the rare legacy

– Hemamalini
(KP Kittappa Pillai Centenary Souvenir, 2013)

The musical legacy of Palghat TS Mani Iyer

A conversation with Palghat Ramprasad

Palghat Mani Iyer was a leading exponent of the Mridangam in Carnatic music. He was an innovator in spirit, and he understood the instrument like no other. He was also the first mridangam player to have been honored with both the Sangitha Kalanidhi and the Padma Bhushan.

Palghat Mani Iyer's grandson, Palghat Ram Prasad, is a Carnatic musician. He is a quantitative economist and holds a doctoral degree from the University of Georgia. Dr. Prasad learnt from his father T.R. Rajaram, and teaches vocal and Violin Carnatic music in Madras.

We spoke to Palghat Ram Prasad ("PRP") about his grandfather's legacy, his music and more:

***Vaak**: What are some values that guided Palghat Mani Iyer's art?*

PRP: While there are several qualities that I can think of in this regard, such as his professionalism, sincerity, the dignity he strived to bring into the field, his research acumen and so on, the one striking feature that amazes me was his aspiration for perfection and constant self-improvement. There is an interesting anecdote that I can recall to elaborate on this point. During one of her visits to our house, my aunt (Lalitha Sivakumar) told my thatha (grandfather) about a concert she had listened to the previous evening. She said that the mridangam artist who had accompanied the vocalist in the concert played at a speed hitherto unheard of. My thatha was inspired by this information. For the next ten days, he woke up earlier than his usual time to practice fast phrases on the mridangam. After 10 days he called my aunt, demonstrated to her this new pace he had practiced, and asked her if what he played matched the speed of the mridangist she mentioned about. He was in his late sixties at that time. I find this story extraordinary because even when he was that old and had already achieved so much, my grandfather always had it in him to 'self-check'.

***Vaak**: In one of our earlier conversations, you spoke about need-based changes in art. Can you tell us a bit more about this? Today, art is based on patronage but is dependent on the audience for it to sustain…*

PRP: There is a difference between striving to create a change for the greater cause of art versus forcing a change (or creating a disturbance) merely to question a system which otherwise works harmoniously. The former is what the

Previous page
Palghat Mani Iyer with T. Rajaram

greats of the past such as Ariyakudi (Ramanuja Iyengar), GNB(alasubramaniam), Alathur Brothers, DKP(atammal) did, and there-by contributed immensely to the art form. Today, we witness a lot of gimmicks (in the guise of contributing to changing the Carnatic music world), the intent of which seems to be about making noises and sensationalising an individual artist's identity, rather than contributing positively.

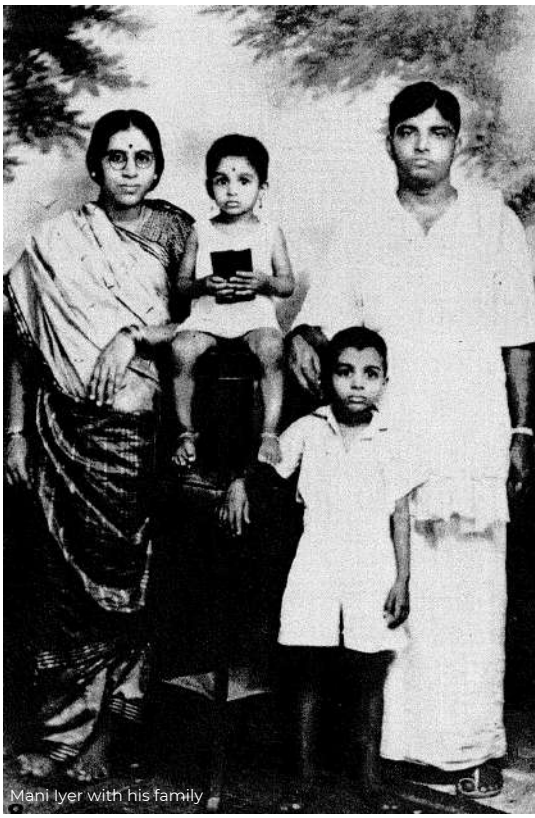
Also, it appears to me that if artists have a generous fan-following, they think they have the liberty to do anything they want to do. They are OK to go unchecked since the numbers are in their favour. But we have to keep in mind that these numbers can be quite misleading. For instance, how foolish would I be if I were to assume that my rendition of Kavaa Kaava Vaa is better than, say, Madurai Mani Iyer's if my video has more Youtube views than his videos! In fact, if an artist has many thousands of followers, he or she must shoulder more responsibility towards the artform.

Mani Iyer's wife Balambal

Speaking of need-based changes in music, I can draw from the cricket world to explain my point. Think of cricketers who have come up with so many new additions and contributions in batting, fielding and bowling styles in recent times to adapt to changes in the game. They innovate within the existing boundaries like the numerous scoop shots, or the kind of slow bouncers, sliding fielding and so on. Instead of thinking about how to constructively make humble contributions within the given contour, they could have easily come up with questions like who decided that bats can't be 2 feet wide? Let me now use a wider bat; why shouldn't I use a ball which can bounce twice? who said the pitch should be 22 yards? It is very easy to question the generally accepted framework than think constructively about making humble modest changes within the given rubric.

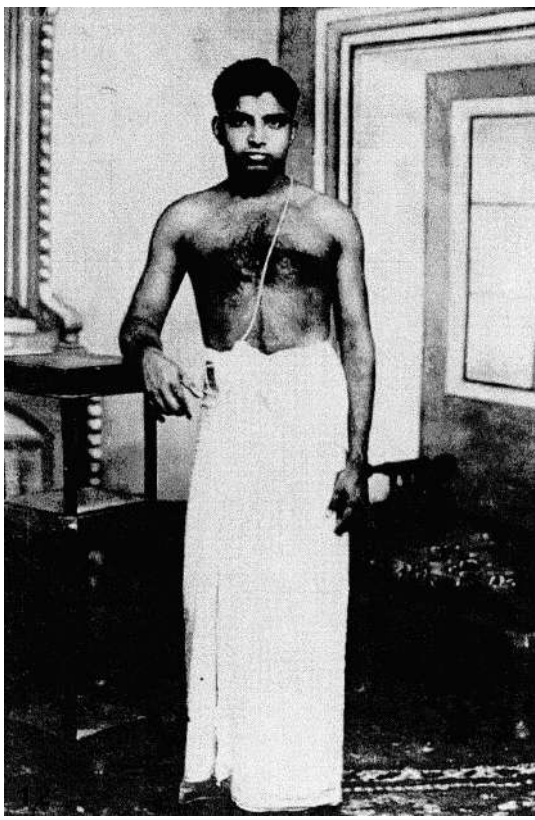
Similarly, the true vidhwath (merit) of an artist lies in thinking of innovations within the already established boundaries (and these boundaries are already very generous), in order to captivate the audience rather than take the more

convenient option of questioning the status-quo.


Mani Iyer with his family

Of course, the popular counter question is what do 'boundaries' mean. When I talk about Madhyamavathi, we know the scale. But if I argue that I need not believe in the scholarship of the person who came up with Madhyamavathi, or question the authenticity of the scale, would it make sense? Should I ask why I should sing this raga within srmpns snpmrs just because someone said I should? In my opinion, these 'questioning for the sake of questioning' are mere excuses for being indisciplined.

To explain further on contributing to the art, we know GN Sir's scholarship in handling ragas like Malavi. We know that no one prior to him has handled this raga elaborately like he did. Does it mean that malavi did not exist until then? It did, but he brought this raga to the performance stage, and showed us how to explore the length and breadth of the raga within its canvas. Now this is real contribution. For the vidhwath he possessed he could have easily come up with say a kolavi, and sung it the way he wanted to without following any discipline. How did Pattamma maami popularise Dikshitar krithis? Contributions in classical artforms are more meaningful when we bring out what already exists back to the fore front, may be in a unique form, and popularize it to the mainstream.



***Vaak**: Surely there is an element of self-interest...?*

PRP: Sure yes, there is an element of self-interest in this, I am not denying that. But we are still talking about the many contributions of the old masters of Carnatic music because their super goal was to provide something meaningful to the art. My grandfather did not disrupt the then status-quo by saying that concerts will start with a thani avarthanam. Given his stature, I am sure that he could have drawn in a much bigger audience with that kind of announcement. He did not do that. Instead, he productively offered something to the field within the boundaries that existed at his time, and this is what I call as contribution and not disruption.

***Vaak**: We have heard people say that well-known male*

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4

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6

7

Previous page
Palghat Mani Iyer sharing stage with:
1. Maharajapuram Viswanatha Iyer & TN Krishnan
2. Palladam Sanjiva Rao & Thiruvalangadu N Sundaresa Iyer
3. GN Balasubramaniam & TN Krishnan
4. Chembai Vaidhyanatha Bhagavathar
5. Thirupampuram Swaminatha Pillai & Palani Subramaniam Pillai
6. MD Ramanathan & MS Gopalakrishnan
7. DK Pattammal & DK Jayaraman

accompanists hesitated or even refused to play for women musicians. How did the on-stage dynamic between a woman musician and a male accompanist work?

PRP: The most important point to note here is the prevailing and evolving social system. I can say this with some kind of authenticity as my doctoral research was on caste, gender, poverty and health in public policy space. Today, we can look back and criticize that they were wrong. But that was a time when women learning music itself was a huge thing. When Pattamma maami was in her early teens, her father used to walk alongside the bullock cart in which mami was inside, listening to the concert procession of Rajarathnam pillai nadaswaram happening in the village. We are really talking about these times. In fact, for several decades, women never participated in the Tygaraja Aradhana. The ecosystem did not allow this. So, before jumping to sneer the past structure, we should be mindful of the context in which these systems existed.

***Vaak**: How was your grandfather in this social system, as you call it?*

PRP: He was part of it.

***Vaak**: But he changed eventually.*

PRP: Mildly. He played for Pattamma Maami and MLV mami. Ideally, one would have expected him to have played for all the three stalwart women musicians, but he isn't alive today for us to question him on this. He would have had his reasons, or may be he did not but that is none of my business. I am not a social scientist to analyze those issues; I am an artist. As a musician, my primary job is to spend time in music, and there is enough and beyond to learn from his music using my time. Once I change my profession, maybe, this could be an interest topic of inquiry.

***Vaak**: Are the present day mridangam players inspired by your grandfather's style and work ethic?*

PRP: I can only guess: the general focus obviously is about his legendary talent and how his name was synonymous with mridangam. For my grandfather, it was also about 'what can I learn from my co-artists and what can they learn from me' while on stage, and his central contention was that a good artist should inspire the other coartists. While pleasing the audience is very important, as an artist, you also must earn the respect of your co-artists for your vidhwath. This balance existed in my grandfather's art, more generally, stalwarts of the past. Whether it was a violinist or mridangist or vocalist, everyone on stage believed in creating good music far beyond projecting their individual prowess. It was not about the voice or string or the beat, it was the unison of all that created good music, which was of paramount importance to each one on stage. These takeaways are very important, especially in the context of the present-day musicians, whose primary goal on stage seems to be to increase their respective microphone volumes.

As for ethics and respect for concert, there is a famous anecdote that thatha often times recounts. Once (Ariyakudi) Ramanuja Ayyengar, mani thatha and Rajamanickam Pillai were on a train for a concert the next evening. Very early in the morning, Mani Thatha woke up to Ramanuja Ayyengar's soft music, and he requested for him to sing that composition for the concert scheduled that evening. Ramanuja Ayyengar told him that the krithi needs more soaking time. Rajamanickam Pillai, who was wide awake by then, told my grandfather that Ayyengar had been soaking in this composition for many years now but is still not convinced that he can sing it during a concert.

That is how intense past artists were. And that is why audience who have witnessed concerts in the past still recall the year of concert, song list and all the co-artists; most importantly they still talk about how a rendition touched their hearts. Today, artists and rasikas are drifting towards intellectualizing music, and as a result, concert experiences are becoming transitory. I really think google has a role to play in transforming the taste of a rasika from being an experiential listener to an intellectual analyst, which in a way is oxymoronic to enjoying an art form. Audience discussing landing notes and other fancy terms during a concert is laudable, but all I am asking is for a rasika to come to a concert and enjoy the music and not delve into the technicalities too much.

***Vaak**: Did Mani Iyer change his style of playing for each musician?*

Following page
Top: Palghat Mani Iyer with: Alathur brothers and Lalgudi Jayaraman

Middle: Palghat Mani Iyer with Ariyakudi Ramanuja Iyengar and Mysore T Chowdiah

Bottom: Palghat Mani Iyer with Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer

L-R: Dakshinamoorthy Pillai, Chembai Vaidyanatha Bhagavathar, Palghat Mani Iyer

PRP: Mani Thatha's playing for Lekhana would be very different for different musicians. He would play it one way for Ramanuja Ayyengar, another for (Alathur) Brothers, another for Semmangudi, but he was able to be in sync with each of their music. I recall TNS mama making a point of past concerts. He pointed that if we listen to concerts of the past even in tape recordings, we enjoy a perfect balance of vocal, violin, mridangam and upam (also Thambura) despite pathetic microphone systems by today's standards. Some of those vocalists are known to have very powerful voices (like Chembai or Iyengarval), some very soft ones (like MMI) despite these differences, if the mridangists and violinists could find the perfect balance to each one, it shows how much of musical sense each of them would have had, and how much of musicality they would have aspired for, rather than prioritize each of their individual brilliance. To top it there was only one central mike in most of those concerts, and despite that the left (thoppi) and right (valanthalai) balance in mridangams was perfect.

As for padathi, PMI believed in following the tradition. Even if he played for a junior artist, it was vocal first, violin second, and mridangam third. He believed that he was only a 'supporting' artist whose role was to enhance the quality of the concert. He always mentioned that his job was to dissolve in the background when the vocalist was in full flow, and during the parts where vocalists had certain challenges, those times, he had to step in to distract the audience towards the mridangam. The interest of the team was paramount. My thatha also said that tani avarthanam should be the most insignificant part in a concert. I think he said this because he used to insist that the artist must show excellence in every song that he played for, and not just during the tani. It is very important to know how to play for compositions, and the other aspects of manodharma like neraval and a kalpana swaram. I am reminded of this when I see some young mridangists these days enter into a concert roughly during the main song, as if that's the only thing to learn. A mridangam artist is successful only when the audience associates the percussionist to a composition. One can always practice a tani avarthanam at home, but the same cannot be done for say a kriti. Accompanying artists must learn this.

Following page
Palghat Mani Iyer with Rajamani, Thyagarajan, Lakshmi and Lalitha

***Vaak**: We did not know you taught violin.*

PRP: Well, I teach how to follow vocal and the manodharmam aspects for a few

violinists. My grandfather used to say that violinists should have two things in mind. One, they should have a watch or a clock in front of them to make sure that they play only 40-50% of the time that the vocalist presented during their solo. If the vocalist is a senior or a popular artist, then this number must be down to 30%. When the audience has already listened to say a 10-minute mukhari by the vocalist, it is difficult both for them and the violinist to build the raga from scratch. Two, there needs to be 'continuity' in bowing. The first thing I tell my violin students is to not take the bow off from the fret board. Ramanuja Ayyengar used to say that violin is like a second tambura. There is a sort of discontinuity when the violin bowing is stopped, a discontinuity that can be compared to that when a tampura is stopped. This is one of the key differences between today's concerts and the concerts from the yesteryears. If you listen closely, you will notice that these olden day concerts have an unexplainable continuity. My grandfather used to believe that mridangam as an accompanying instrument is only secondary to the violin. He

Palghat Mani Iyer with Begum Parveen Sultana

often said that it is only the violin that gives the wholesomeness needed in a concert. Also, my grandfather said that if the artist sang for one hour, the mridangam player should play the tani for not more than 3 to 4 minutes. If the artist sings for two hours, then it must only be 8-10 mins. But if the audience demanded it, then you can play more. You can play more only when your audience wants you to play. Interestingly, thaatha used to a play 15-20 min thanis. My father once asked the legendary flutist Mali about this. Mali responded that "if someone plays like Mani Iyer, (then) the audience will listen to even a 20-hour tani. Your father also started with a 5-min tani, but the audience wanted more".

The standards of violin and *upapakkavadhyam* have particularly improved tremendously today.

***Vaak**: True.*

PRP: In the last 25 years especially. One must credit Vid. Harishankar for this upward shift in the quality of upam. My grandfather told him that he regrets that Harishankar did not come to learn from him few years earlier, when thaatha was physically in a much better shape.

Palghat Mani Iyer with TR Mahalingam and TN Krishnan

***Vaak**: How did he accompany for padams?*

PRP: Nothing specific that I recall except for that he did not want to dilute the vocalist's musicality in padams. In fact, he used to say that he achieved success only because he enhanced a rendition by taking a backseat whenever required, even if that moment requires complete silence from his end. [A sample recording of Palghat Mani Iyer accompanying Semangudi Srinivasa Iyer for Ninnu Juchi, a padam Punnagavarali

***Vaak**: His views on creating theermanams?*

PRP: He believed in keeping the theermanams short so much so that sometimes he never played theermanams. He said that one must leave the audience with the song, and not with a theermanam.

***Vaak**: Did he experiment with other instruments?*

PRP: Casually he used to play the kanjira. Those days most of the mridangists played the kanjira. As for maintaining and experimenting with the mridangam making per se, I would recommend that you refer to the middle 4 chapters of TM Krishna's book 'Sebastian and Sons'. I consider those chapters in the book as a holy-reference, for any musician, mridangist or otherwise. Those are some of the most researched artifacts I have come across in recent times.

Following page
Palghat Mani Iyer with Ariyakudi Ramanuja Iyengar, TN Krishnan & Palani Subramania Pillai, The Gemini wedding. Palghat Raghu is seen seated behind Mani Iyer

Vaak: *How was his relationship with Pazhani Subramaniya Pillai?*

Palghat Mani Iyer playing the Kanjira

PRP: Extremely cordial, and the mutual respect they shared will fall short of words; infact we had a silver plate in our house called Pazhani thattu for him to be served his meals, when he visited our place.

Vaak*: There are times when the vocalist can sing a song that the mridanganist may not be aware of. How did he manage such instances?*

He was very astute on stage. In fact, Lalgudi, Srimathi, Mani Iyer and Raja Mani were a team for 4-5 years in the mid 60s. Lalgudi used to play everything twice, my periappa would play along the first time, and Mani thaatha would play only the second time since he would not have memorized the song. But if you are in the audience, you wouldn't notice that. There is also an incident with Pattama Maami. Once, she wanted to sing an intricate pallavi and had sent Lalitha athai to sing it to thatha the morning of the concert so that Thatha is familiar

with it. Thaatha was not too clear about the pallavi and was quite confused till he went to the stage. But funnily, in the concert it sounded as if the RTP was actually set by thatha, that he played with so much of command and understanding. That night, my father asked thatha about this contradiction; to which thatha replied that he still had no clue about RTP or how he played what he played. “All I did was just play the mridangam”, he had said. For him, playing in a concert may be was a meditative experience.

DISCOGRAPHY

A Compilation of Palghat Mani Iyer’s greatest moments on stage

Tani Avartanas

Rupaka Tala

Misra Chapu Tala

Adi Tala

Accompaniments

Raga Punnagavarali | Ninnu Juchi | Kshetrayya | Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer

Raga Shankarabaranam | Manasu Swadina | Tyagaraja | GN Balasubramaniam

Raga Todi | Enduku Daya Radu | Tyagaraja | Alathur Brothers

Speech

Palghat Mani Iyer Speech on Layam

All India Radio Interview in Tamil

Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer’s speech on Palghat Mani Iyer

Pair of Carved Wood Hindu Lion (*Simmam*) Temple Ornaments

Tamil Nadu or Karnataka, South India

17th-18th century

Dimensions: *48.5*cm

My tryst with Tanjore paintings

Veeren Koneru

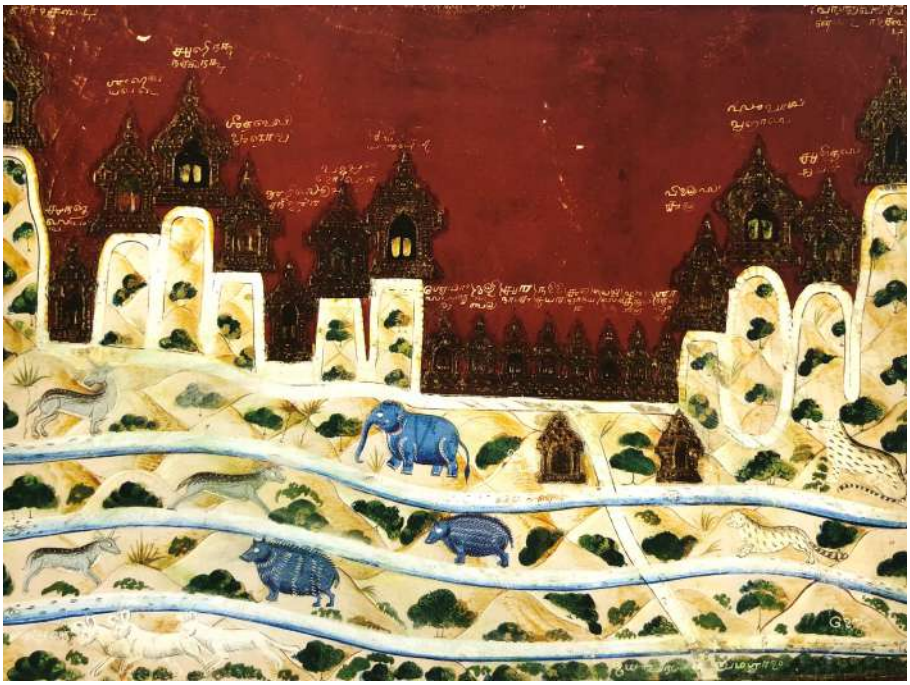
As a *19*-year-old when I was in my *2*nd year of medical school, my first acquisition of a Tanjavur painting happened quite by serendipity. In a dimly lit artefact store that sold kitschy handicrafts and curios, I came across a resplendent Tanjavur painting richly gilded with gold that shone like the sun. The painting was that of Krishna in Darbar.

He is delicately seated on a golden throne whose legs are in the shape of parrots. He is holding a golden pot of butter, and on either side of him are his parents, Nanda and Yashoda. On the right side, Yashoda is beautifully bedecked in plush jewellery with Mallipoo (jasmine) strands in her hair. A beautiful green parrot is perched on her left hand, and there is a blob of butter in her right hand. To his left, stands Nanda with a Vaishnava Thirunamam (white Y-shaped mark with a red midline) on his forehead and he is gingerly holding a pink rose in his left hand.

Veeren Koneru's first Tanjore painting. This subject is popularly referred to as Vennaithali Krishnar

Krishna himself is in a pale pink skin tone. If you observe keenly, you can see that he is wearing the choicest of jewellery: on his neck, there is a Pulinagam (Tiger pendant), a Pathakam (pendant) strung with gold beads, and rows of Muthu Malai (Pearl strands); on his arms are gorgeous Vankis with Yazhi motifs on them; his wrists are adorned with a Makarakadagam among other bangles; on his ears hang Jhimkis with pearl drops, Kolusu are seen on his feet, and his hair is adorned with Thalai Saman like the Suryan, Chandran and an aigrette along with a peacock feather. The golden pot of butter that he is holding has the Thirunamam, Shankam and Chakram (conch shell and discus) on it. The attention to detail in this painting is stunning. Nanda's moustache is done in true miniature style and is a marvel. The Mandapam that Krishna is seated under is rather simple. The painting, although done in low relief without encrusted stones, is typical of Tanjore paintings. It has traces of stones, and most of them had already been hastily plucked from the surface.

Krishna with his delicate features spoke to me that day. What followed was three sleepless nights. On the third day, I went to the store with a tiny fortune of cash tightly held in my pocket and brought the Krishna home. I stared at the painting for hours only to discover a new detail each time. I wondered who the artist was, for he never signed on this masterpiece. I still have no idea who the patron is, or who commissioned this painting, or in whose house this painting hung for more than four generations. Why would anyone want to part with this?



Shatrunjaya Hill (?), Tanjavur, 42.7 x 53.3 cm. (Thanjavur's Gilded Gods, 2018)

Tanjavur painting

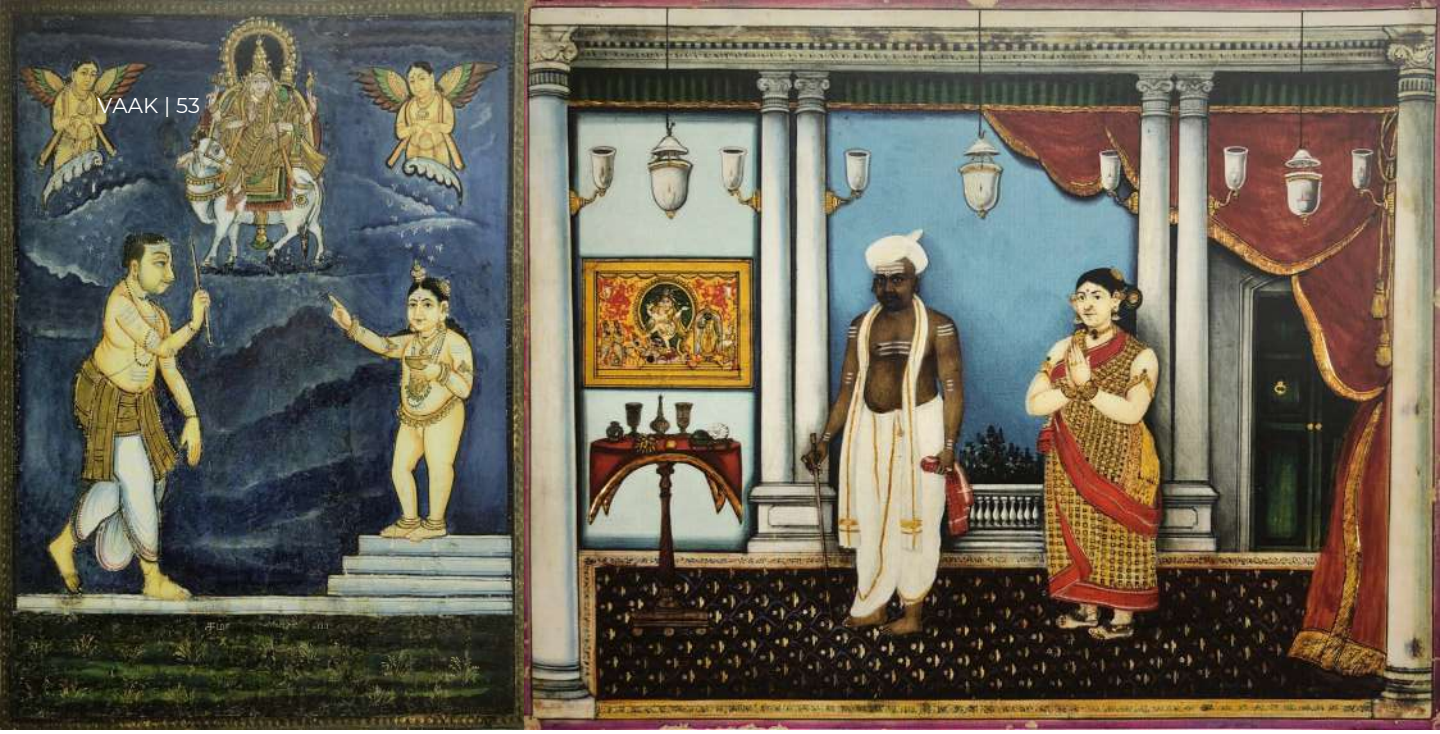
The Tanjavur region, abundantly blessed by the river Cauvery, patronised the arts. This region has given us rich art forms such as the Tanjavur paintings, the famous Tanjavur plate etc. Popularly known as Palagai Padam, these icons of worship are gilded in gold, richly decorated with embedded stones, and rendered on planks of wood. This art form was patronized by Serfoji XI, the Maratha king who ruled Tanjavur. The artists who made them are believed to be from the Telugu speaking Raju community who migrated from present day Andhra Pradesh. The wooden planks are seasoned and layered with paper or cloth (often newspapers), and the surface is decorated with gesso and gilded with gold foil. The rich use of foiled glass that mimicked precious stones is an important aspect of Tanjavur paintings. Hung in worship rooms, these icons were revered and passed on.

The paintings often have a central large figure under an ornate mandapam, with smaller figures on either side. The mandapams are decorated with blinds and garlands. Some paintings are decorated with glass chandeliers and lanterns indicating European influence. Winged angels are a quintessential presence in these paintings, and they are depicted as holding musical instruments or garlands. The themes vary from Vaishnavite and Saivite subjects to lesser-known Kula Deivams (local village Gods).

Following page
Shiva as Urdha Tandava, Tanjavur, 75 x 57 cm (Thanjavur's Gilded Gods, 2018)

The marriage of Krishna and Satyabhama,
19th Century

48 x 63 cm
(Bonhams, 2019)



Top Left: Sambandar being scolded by his father, Tanjavur, 50 x 40 cm

Top Right: Accountant and his wife, Tanjavur, 38.1 x 49.9 cm (Thanjavur's Gilded Gods, 2018)

While speaking to a hereditary artist I gathered that when families planned to construct a house, a Tanjavur artist was also consulted alongside consulting wood artisans and masons. The family discussed the theme of the painting and a token sum was given to the artist before the construction of the new property. The artist would bring a semi-finished painting to the house at an auspicious time. Prayers were rendered after which the artist would proceed to paint the eyes of the central deity as the final part in finishing the painting. The painting would then be ceremoniously hung in the family's worship room.

Aiyanar, his consorts and Karuppan, Tanjavur, 75 x 57 cm (Thanjavur's Gilded Gods, 2018)

We know of Tanjavur paintings as depictions of the Gods but some rare ones that I have had the good fortune of seeing include those of devadasis, and lesser known folk stories. I have also seen a set of paintings depicting all the vahana processions of the Sri Ranganathar temple at Srirangam, and a beautiful set of Dasavataras.

A lovelorn lady
Andhra (?)

63.3 x 51.4 cm
(Thanjavur's Gilded Gods, 2018)

Portrait of a lady
with a dog,
Tanjavur

56.5 x 67.5 cm
(Thanjavur's Gilded Gods, 2018)

Relevance in contemporary context

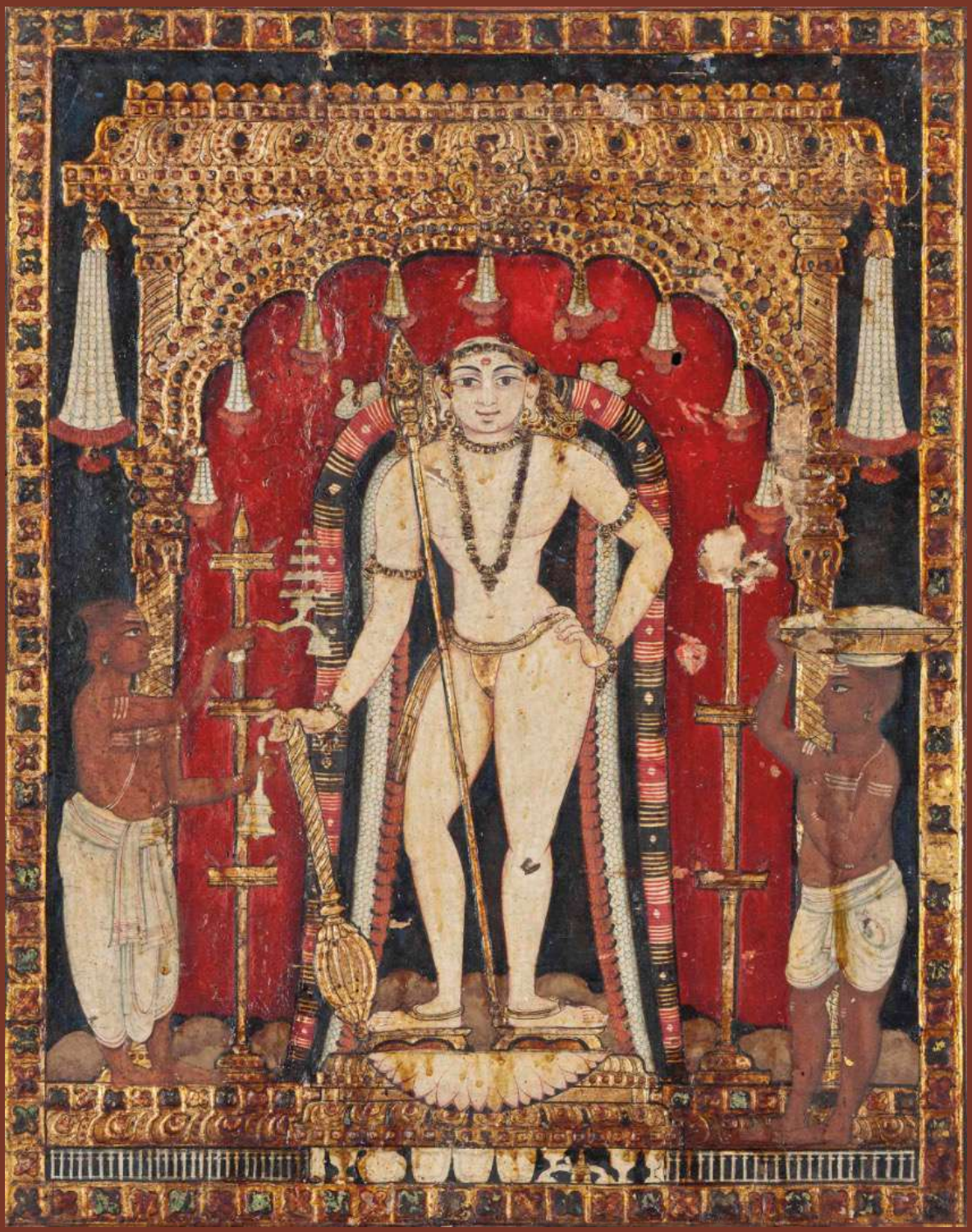
Although these paintings have become a household commodity, thanks to hobby artists and widespread interior bloggers, we should accept that the lovely delicate features became garish looking figures. The beautiful foil backed stones are now replaced by plastic, and the gold foil is a mere imitation of its original. Early Tanjavur paintings are typical of low relief gesso and exquisite attention to detail. In early period Tanjavurs, we can notice the adaptation of European looking interiors/blinds and Venetian chandeliers that are depicted hanging from the mandapam, floor chandeliers that are seen adorning the deity on either sides. But during the later period, especially post *1900s,* these paintings came with lesser details and with heightened gesso. While the myth of precious stones like diamonds and emeralds inlaid into Tanjavur is very fascinating, it is often coloured glass with a foiled back that mimics precious stones. I am yet to see an example with precious stones inlaid into the painting.

Today the art of gilding with pure gold leaf is almost gone. It is very important to mention the 'fake Tanjavur' market that thrives on collectors' love for older works. The skyrocketing prices in turn lead to great artists faking and remaking old looking paintings rather than them making contemporary new ones, adhering to the old examples and principles.

I truly wish the handful of artists who hold the skill of gilding teach it to their students. I also hope for contemporary artists to collaborate with each other to create master pieces that will help in the survival of this artform. There is an urgent need to revive the Tanjavur painting tradition. Private collectors and households need to come out with their collections to share and celebrate this rich vibrant heritage, opening a dialogue for an in depth study of these bejewelled wonders.

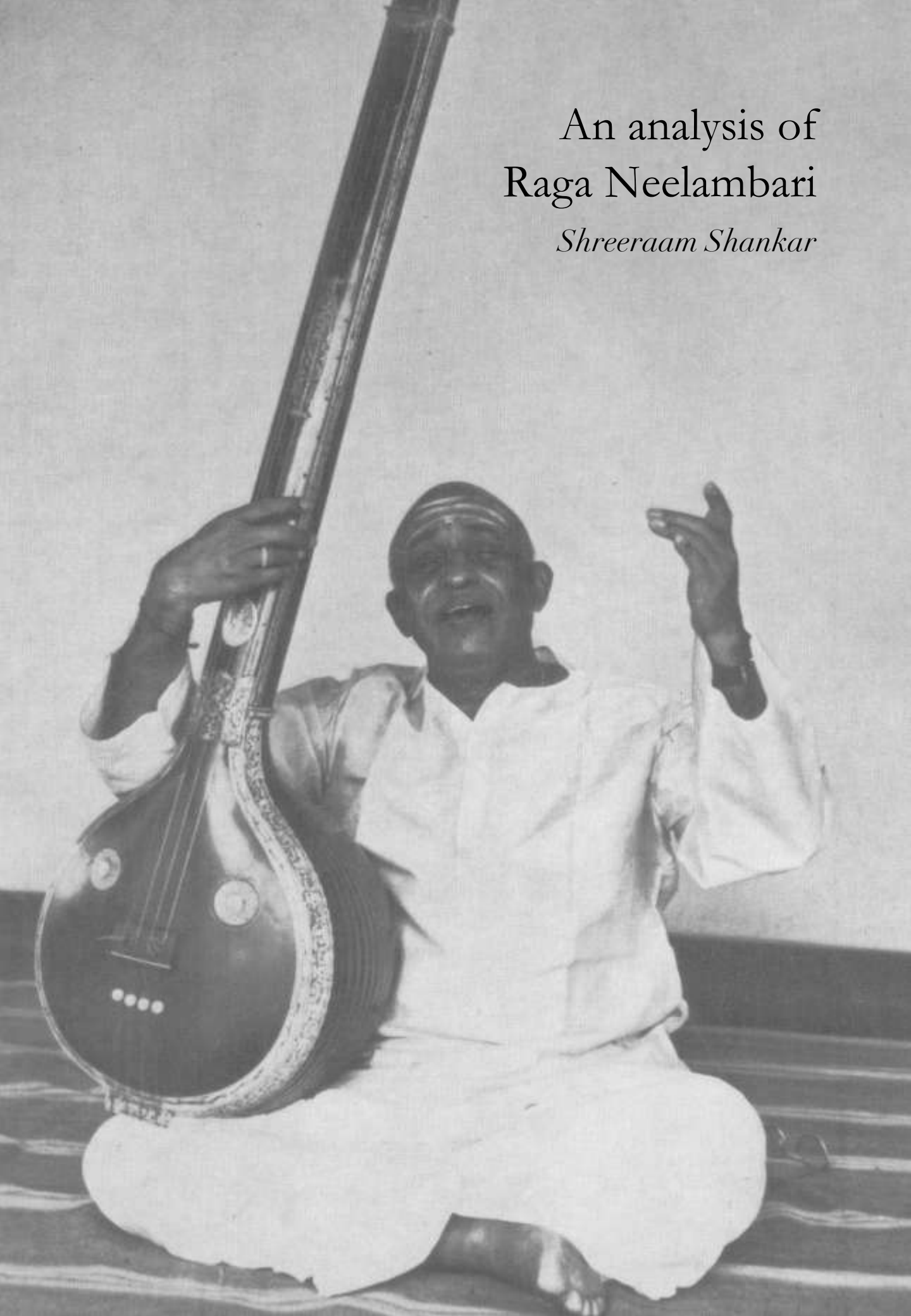
Following page
Muruga as Dhandapani,
38 x 30.5 cm
(Christies, 2016)

Veeren is a radiologist by profession. He is a connoisseur of South Indian arts and is based out of Pondicherry.



An analysis of Raga Neelambari

Shreeraam Shankar



Neelambari is an ancient raga that dates back to *1100* CE. An earliest reference to the raga is from the text Sangita Makarandha[1]. This treatise is attributed to Narada[2] (7^{th} 9^{th} century) and is divided into two parts: music and dance, each is further divided into four sections. The first part of the text is devoted to music (sangita). It has subsections dealing with the origin of nada and swaras, classification of ragas, associations of the swaras with factors such as gramas, murchanas. It also explains various musical terms such as vadi, sruti, alamkara etc[3].

Ancient ragas like Neelambari, predate the concept of a bounded scale[4], referred to as Arohana (ascending half) and Avarohana (descending half) in modern parlance. These ragas are defined by their sancharas (characteristic phrases).

Neelambari in today's context takes the following notes:
Shadjam (S), Chathusruthi Rishabham (R*2*), Anthara Gandharam (G*3*), Suddha Madhyamam, (M*1*), Panchamam (P), Chatushruthi Deivatham (D*2*) and Kakali Nishadham (N*3*)[5].

Neelambari is a Bhashanga raga[6], that take an aniya swara (extraneous note). In Neelambari, this behavior can be observed in phrases like PNDN and PDNDNP with the occurrence of Kaishiki Nishadam (N*2*).

Lakshana terms for Neelambari[1]:

- Nyasa swaras, notes which can be used as the ending notes[7]: M&P
- Common kampitha swaras: R&M
- No phrases are sung below the Manthrastayi Nishadam

Characteristic phrases in raga Neelambari:

gmpm pnṡ ṡnpmgm mgrgmpmgrgm,g s
s,ṇ srgmpgm mp ṡ nṡṁgrg ṡ ṡndnṡnpm
gmpdn$_2$dn$_3$ṡ, ṡdpmgm rgmpdn$_2$dpmgrgmpmg rdp,mgrg s

The above Sancharis have been sung and explained by Shrikhar Giridharan

Artists will agree that it is very difficult to sing Manodharma in Neelambari. This is because to the fact that the kernel of this raga is abstract and needs a deeper understanding outside the scope of Arohana and Avarohana.

To understand Neelamabari, one has to embark on many hours of grueling practice and delve into its emotional ecosystem to fully do justice to this raga.

Below is an analysis of raga Neelambari handled by two prolific musicians from different generations: Semmangudi R. Srinivasa Iyer and Thodur Madhuboosi Krishna.

An analysis of Neelambari by TM Krishna

TM Krishna in this elaborate kalpana swara constructs the raga like a building, a method used in alapana construction from time immemorial. This method of building a raga in specific regions and working up the octave has been used by many legendary musicians including Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer[8], G.N.Balasubramaniam[9], KV Narayanaswamy[10] during ragam-thanam-pallavi. But this method is employed generally on ragas like Kalyani or Kamboji which have a lot of Nyasa points. In these cases, artists can anchor themselves to construct the raga in specific areas around such points. T.M. Krishna has incorporated this technique into an abstract, patchy raga such as Neelambari in a very clever fashion.

In Carnatic music, the first and the fifth tonics (S and P respectively) are not sung with Gamakas since they are used as reference for other swaras. These two points, therefore, act as anchor points for every raga.

T.M. Krishna clearly defines his structure of exploration by establishing the first anchor point: Madhyasthayi Sadjam (*21:01*). He explores the raga briefly around this area and does not go below the Mandhrasthayi Nishadam throughout the exposition. He then moves up the octave with the help of jaarus such as the one from R to P (*21:24*).

He touches the Panchamam and establishes the second anchor point, the Madhyasthaayi Madhyama (M). He reaches this Madhyama in different ways: RPM, RMG, SRGM, SPM. The Madhyama is embellished with a lot of gamakkas such as jaarus, kampitham, jantas, etc.
He plays hide and seek with the Panchama, at *21:48* he indicates that P is his third anchor point by never fully exploring it but teasing the swara to create an atmosphere of anticipation. M and P are very close together and he shows this distinction between M, the second anchor point and Pa, the third anchor point. There are the following phrases with P as an anchor point: SPPMMG, SNPNM, GMPPM, PDP, MDPM, MNPDP.

Following page
TM Krishna with Akkarai Subbulakshmi, K Arunprakash and Chandrashekar Sharma. (First Edition Arts, 2019)

You can hear him touch the Tharasthayi Sadjam at *22:50*. T.M. Krishna then establishes a Dhaattu Prayoga[11] SM (at *23:10*) as if to remind us that M is the jeeva swara.

The shift to the fourth anchor point, Tharasthayi Sadjam, is complete at *23:15*. While exploring around the Tharasthayi Sadjam, he stumbles upon a Madhyamakala phrase: SNSRSRNSNP at *23:32*.

He covers the whole upper octave before his descend. Before shifting the method of singing swaras, TM Krishna hits the Tharasthayi Panchama (at *24:22*) and explores the raga at that range for a short period. TM Krishna drops the anchor point style only to show us the raga in its full range from Madhyasthayi Madhyamam to Tharasthayi Panchama. This meandering exploration acts as a hallmark for his swara prastharam. It is felt dramatically, thanks to an aesthetic increase in the volume of the mridangam. At *24:47* a listener can notice his voice modulation. This acts as the crescendo of his exploration of the raga in the Tharasthayi. A quick descend follows with the help of phrases such as: MGS, NP, PM, MGR.

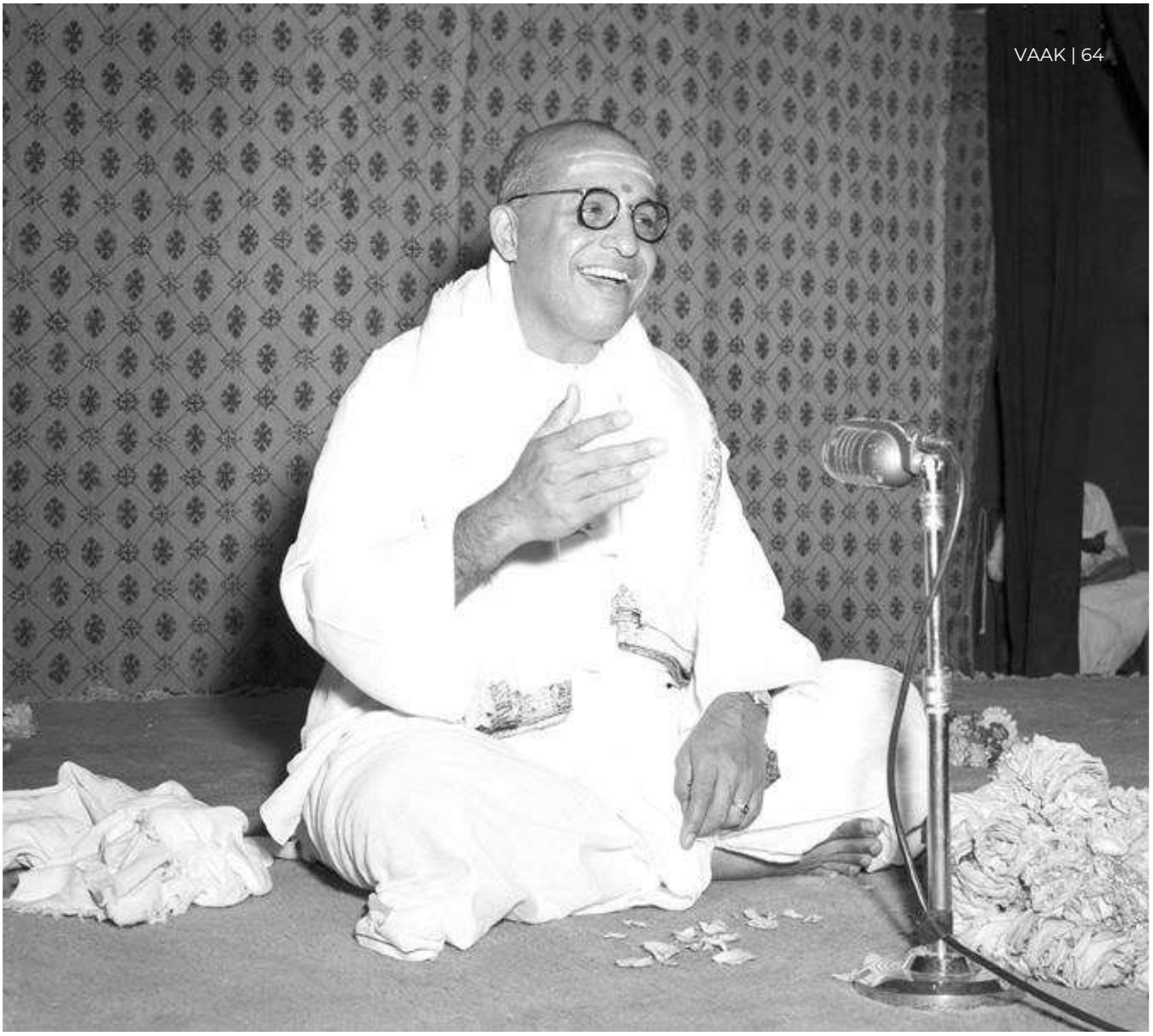
A korappu phrase is sung as a way of linking back to the compositional line:
MNPMG
MDPMG
MPMG
PMG
MG
MGRG Amba (GS jaaru)

An analysis of Neelambari by Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer

After listening to the recording above, one wonders if TM Krishna drew a lot of inspiration from his guru Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer. Perhaps Semmangudi was one of the first few musicians to sing manodharma in raga Neelambari. In this recording, he sings in an unhurried pace by centering his swara prastharam around the only anchor point, the Panchamam. He establishes this with the very first phrase: PMG. At *09:08*, Semmangudi sings the opposite of korappu, where he adds notes to phrases in order to show the full range of the raga: MGS, PMGS, NPMGS, SNPMGRGMG.

It is extraordinarily difficult to conceive the soundscape of a raga by just standing on one note that is common to many ragas, the Panchamam. But at *10:00*, Semmangudi performs this truly mind-boggling feat. It is not possible to achieve this without true mastery in the substance and feeling of the raga.

Neelambari is usually thought of as a slow raga. General notions include that this raga cannot be explored in faster speeds using patterns of swaras. But



Semmangudi challenges and breaks this traditional idea of Neelambari by innovating through swaras in the second speed, that gives rise to a a phrase with jantai on the Rishabham.

Phrases that highlight Neelambari: PMNP, PGM, SMGMP, PNDN, RGRPM with a higher Panchama (with a small shade of Deivatha).

Phrases that are unusual in his rendition: PMNP, SNMPP, SMGMP (the mirror image of PNDNS)

To innovate within the grammar needs tremendous manodharma.
Semmangudi in this rendition shows us how it's done.

DISCOGRAPHY

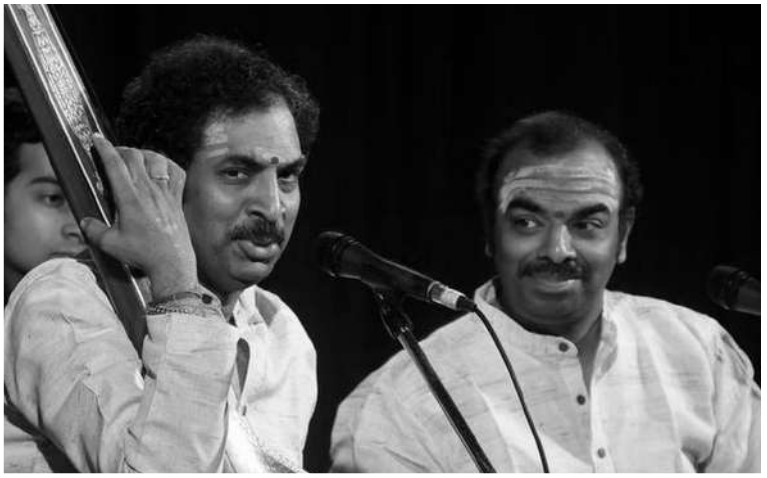
T Balasaraswati | Amba neelambari | Ponnaiah Pillai | Adi

Sanjay Subramanyam | Kana kan ayiram | Anai Ayya | Adi

Malladi brothers | Etuvanti vade | Kshetrayya | Tisra Triputa

TK Rangachari | Amba neelambari | Ponnaiah Pillai | Adi

Vaak is Shreeraam's brainchild. Shreeraam Shankar curates music and aims to be an expert musicologist. He is also a documentary filmmaker and his directorial debut is on the life of the musician Rangaramanuja Iyyengar. Shreeraam is interested in South Indian antiquities. He studies Biomedical Engineering at Imperial College, London.



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[2] Wikipedia, “Sangita Makarandha,” [Online]. Available: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sangita_Makarandha

[3] S. Rao, "Sangita Makaranda," [Online]. Available: https://sreenivasaraos.com/tag/sangita-makaranda/.

[4] TM Krishna has written about the current Melakartha tradition elaborately: T.M. Krishna, "Centred upon centuries," The Hindu, [Online]. Available: https://www.thehindu.com/features/friday-review/music/Centred-upon-centuries/article15529155.ece

[5] M. Charulatha, "Soothing the senses," The Hindu, [Online]. Available: https://www.thehindu.com/features/metroplus/soothing-the-senses/article5843142.ece

[6] A. Mahesh, "Analysis of Amba Neelayathakshi Neelambari - Adi- 2kalai Muthuswamy Dikshithar".

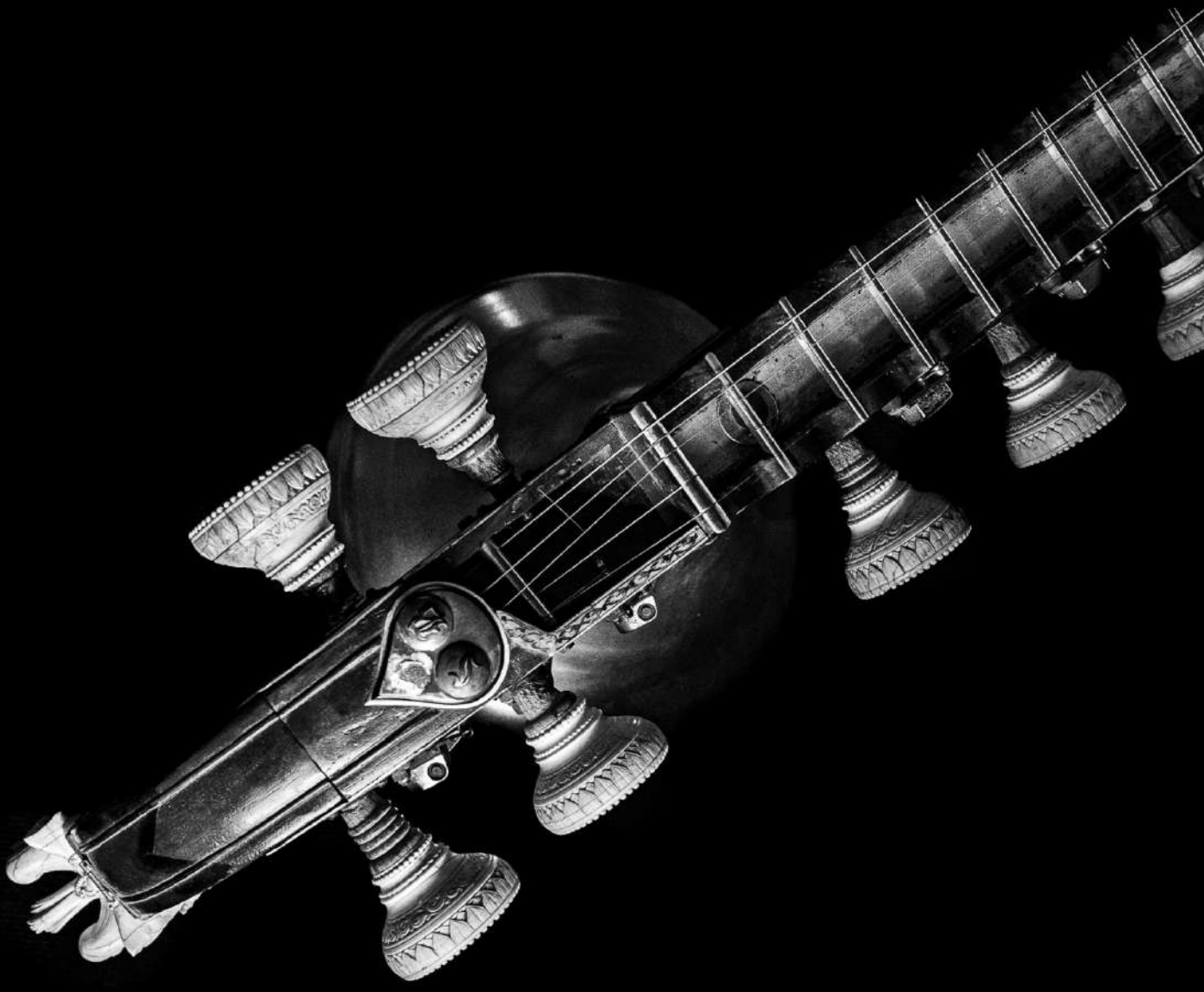
[7] Raga Surabhi , “Myriad Hues Of Ragas,” [Online]. Available: https://www.ragasurabhi.com/carnatic-music/surabhi-post/post--post0007--myriad-hues-of-ragas.html

[8] Bhairavi raga alapana by Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer

[9] Saveri raga alapana by GN Balasubramaniam

[10] Sankarabharanam raga alapana by KV Narayanaswamy

[11] A Dhaattu Prayoga is a phrase in which the notes inbetween two notes are skipped. This is different from a jaaru because the slide is not present, instead there is a sharp jump from one note to another.



S Balachander, the phenomenon

Baradwaj Raman
Photographs by Amar Ramesh

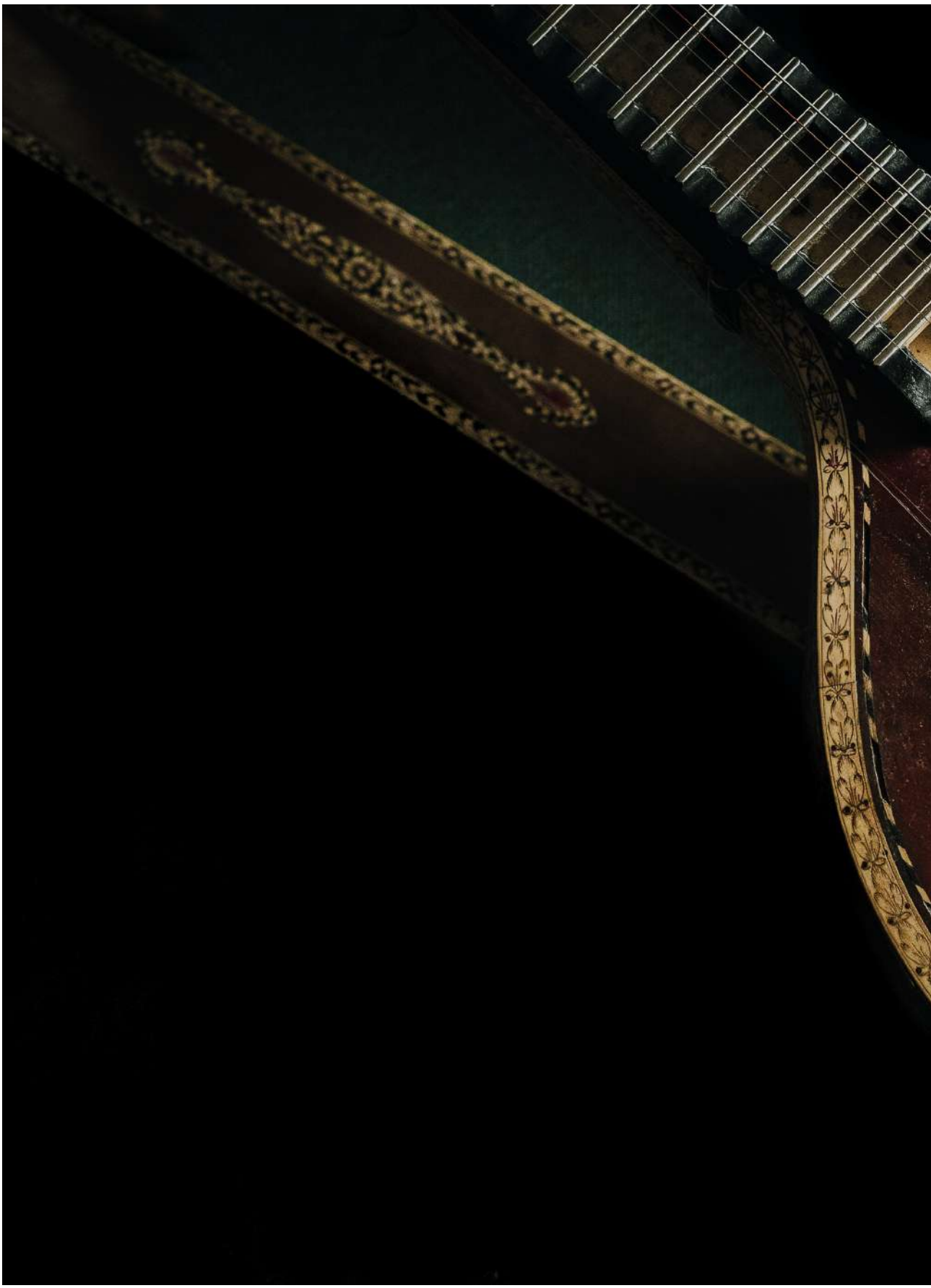
It is said that all real learning is self-learning and no one embodied that better than my grandfather, Padma Bhushan Dr. S. Balachander. For many years as a kid, I would listen to his audio recordings and wonder how he conceived such unimaginable phrases on the Veena, especially being a self-taught musician. He had no guru whatsoever but his grasping power and keen interest in everything under the sun was incredible. In this article I will concentrate mainly on his journey to find the ultimate sound of and on the Veena.

S. Balachander, more known as 'SB' during his time, started his musical journey when he was *5* years old as a Kanjira player and the true-blue prodigy that he was, his eighth year saw him performing concerts as an accompanying artiste on the Tabla. During one such concert tour in Karachi when Balachander was *9* years old, he was gifted a Sitar by a lady in the audience. She had bought it for her own son who found no use for it and had consigned it to the loft. Some strings were rusted and others missing. But a new world had opened up to Balachander's insatiable genius. That lady's gift was to be a key steppingstone to his home, his moksha, the Veena.

Within *9* months Balachander had repaired, practiced on and mastered the instrument only to present his first Carnatic music concert on the Sitar. Never one to conform, SB as an audacious pre-teenager, performed Carnatic concerts on the Sitar and also gave vocal concerts in Hindustani music. Within a very short span of time, he understood that Sitar was unsuitable for Carnatic music and in the Saraswati Veena, he found his true calling.

During my teenage years, I would try to replicate some of the phrases that SB essayed effortlessly but could never understand how it was played. SB did not have many students and the ones he had never pursued music as a career. They learnt under him only for personal satisfaction. There are not many musicians who even understood how he played such extra ordinary melody, leave alone attempt to replicate it.

There was no easy way for me to understand his music. I had broken countless strings, each trial and error bringing me closer in my relentless pursuit of the SB sounds. After many years of practice, I believe I have come closer to the essence



But that takes nothing away from the awe I continue to feel while listening to him, his music always being greater than the sum of the notes.

So, what is so unique about the elusive *Balachander Bani* as it is called?

While his style of Veena playing transformed over the years, the core of his pursuit was the same. He saw in the Veena potential to match and even surpass that of the human voice. So, he created a revolution in the playing technique, pulling whole octaves, adding Sitar inspired fingering techniques and even pulling in the pit of the Veena. The array of techniques he created with the divine instrument, each mastered to mirror his incredible emotive potential, was also another reason for his music to be spontaneous and out of the ordinary. SB's playing technique was characterized by analyzing the ragas, the songs, the meanings of the songs and the emotional state of the composer who composed it. Another aspect of SB's musical pursuit, one that is oft overlooked but equally important, is his experimentation with the design and acoustic quality of the veena.

One of the first difficulties SB faced as a Veena player was that for him to play a difficult raga like Devagandhari or Yadukulakambhoji, a lot of pulling of strings or bending of strings needed to be done. Very often when he practiced his pulling, he realized that the strings would go out of tune. There were two things that caused the issue.

First, the strings were resting on two bridges on either side, and both of them were carelessly glued on the Veena on approximation, and neither of them were strong enough to hold the tension of the strings. The second, and the most important issue was that the brittle nature of the Veena's resonator would cause it to warp under pressure of the resonator side bridge when SB tried to pull and play. To resolve this issue, the resonator would have to be thicker, making the whole instrument heavier. SB would have to start customizing his Veenas.

As a solution, SB found the best Veena maker of his time, a specialist who made Veenas from scratch with utmost care throughout the process, Narayana Aachari (from Tanjavur). After much convincing, Narayana Aachari agreed to make Veenas for SB, a few kilos heavier than the Veenas he had been making all the while for others. SB made it a point to be part of the process when the Veena was made, giving specific instructions so that the instrument was made according to his liking and preference. As regards the bridges, after much thought, he settled on Perspex (highest grade of acrylic used for fabricating

aircraft windows) so that they don't warp under pressure. There was one other issue that nagged him. He was annoyed by the screeching sound of the strings that contact the bridges when pulling and playing. Even to this day, the Veena makers fabricate the bridge top (the plate on top of the bridge over which the strings pass) and the frets in copper or brass. This caused a significantly annoying sound when contacted with the string due to excessive friction caused. Again, after lots of research and trial and error, SB settled on high quality *316* grade stainless steel. Every part of the instrument that was in metal was immediately switched to stainless steel. This drastically reduced the friction and enhanced his playing technique significantly. These, however, did not solve another important problem.

Even after doing all these alterations SB realized that the strings still went out of tune though not as frequently as before. The quest for the ideal solution led SB to the more reliable Guitar tuning machine heads rather than the dated gearless wooden tuners (Birudai as they are called in Veena parlance) of the Veena. This greatly reduced the strings from going out of tune. This also reduced the time it took to restring the Veena. Since the gearless wooden pegs

became redundant, SB found the best ivory sculptor of India, Viswam, to sculpt all the gearless tuners in ivory with each one depicting a unique God or Goddess. SB also made it a point to affix his awards on his Veenas. This was his way of thanking the instrument and the Goddess Saraswathi herself, for showering him with the knowledge and musicality that was unique to him. SB tried a variety of strings from lots of other instruments to enhance the tone and volume of the Veena. He experimented generously with Piano strings, Cello strings, Bass strings, Guitar strings, etc. SB also customized amplification methods like microphones, acoustic pickups, packaging and transportation boxes for the Veena's safety. With websites like Amazon or Bajaao, we have easy access to electronics today. But in his time, access to these products were not only difficult but they were also unimaginably expensive.

SB was not just unapologetic in his pursuits to try new things on the Veena, but also in his self-analysis. His style of playing was tough and required hours of practice; he did asura sadhakam on the instrument. Shantha Balachander, my grandmother, says that SB felt bad that he missed practice every time he went on his film shooting trips as director so much that he would practice double the

usual time once he came back. Be it to beg forgiveness for playing a phrase out of tune, or to thank God when he stumbled across a beautiful musical phrase, SB used the phrase 'Andavane' lavishly. For all the world, Veena was SB and for SB, the Veena was all.

DISCOGRAPHY

Raga Hamsadhwani | Vatapi ganapathim | Muthuswamy Dikshitar | Adi

Raga Devagandhari | Vinarada na manavi | Tyagaraja | Deshadi

Raga Malahari | Pancha maathanga | Muthuswamy Dikshitar | Rupakam

Raga Hamsanandam | Bantu reeti kolu | Tyagaraja | Deshadi

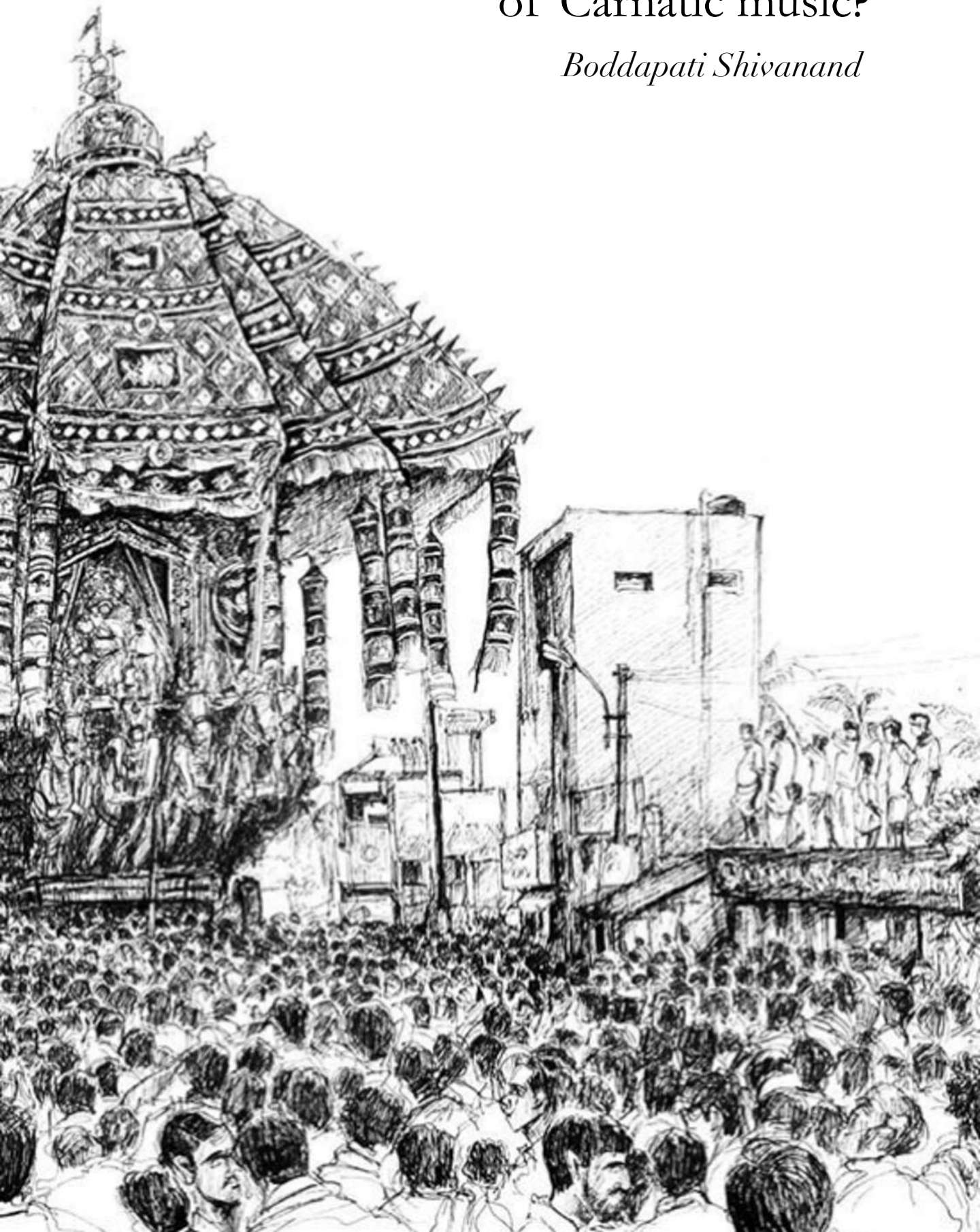
S Balachander | Concert *1* | Concert *2* | Concert *3*

Baradwaj Raman | Concert

Baradwaj Raman is a Veena artiste, sound engineer and music composer based out of Madras. He is also the grandson of Veena Maestro S.Balachander. He has performed in leading Sabhas in India and across the world, including at the Music Academy, Narada Gana Sabha, Indian Fine Arts Society, Bharat Kalachar, Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan in London and SIFAS Singapore. His Veena, called the Sarasvitar, is portable, detachable, extremely light weight, and still maintains amplitude and tonal quality of the instrument. He is the recipient of Nadha Kala Vipanchee and Tamizh Yazh Isai Selvan awards.

Who were the real Trinity of Carnatic music?

Boddapati Shivanand



Today, Tyagaraja, Muthuswami Dikshitar and Syama Shastri are said to have laid the foundations of Carnatic music. The journey of their musical brilliance from Thanjavur to Madras and into the canon of this classical music is considered a natural progression. Immortalised as a trio in S. Rajam's painting (c.*1940*), they adorn the environment of music classes, colleges, and sabhas. However, can we consider their fine musicianship as the only reason why they are ubiquitous in the world of Carnatic music today? Their stories are well told by many, but it is the period between Tyagaraja's death (*1847*) and the founding of the Madras Music Academy (*1928*) that is often glossed over.

Tyagaraja of course was the most popular of the three. Palm leaf manuscripts of his compositions and biographical accounts have persisted even until today. But we find traces of how the trinity came to be seen together and the after-life of their compositions in the print literature of the time. The first printed mention of the trinity together, appears in *Sangeetha Sarvarthasarasangrahamu (The Complete Sense and Essence of Music)* in *1859* by Vina Ramanuja. A study of the text by Rajshri Sripathy reveals that that the number of padams by Kshetrayya, Sarangapani and Parimalaranga far outnumber that of Dikshitar, Syama Shastri or even Subbaraya Shastri (Sripathy *2008*, *49*). But the text seems to emphasise Tyagaraja's contribution, even providing the first notation for the kritis.

The emphasis on the trinity as a whole does not appear until the interventions of the Taccur Singaracharyulu brothers. They were the disciples of Fiddle Rangacharyulu, who was in turn taught by Subbaraya Shastri (Taccur *1905*, *25*). Starting with *Swaramanjari (A Bouquet of Notes)* C.*1880*, and ending with *Ganendusekharam (The Collection of Songs)* in *1912*, their six books mark a new phase in musical education at that time. Starting with the third book in the series, *Sangita Kalanidhi (Musical Art-Wealth)* published in *1889,* the same *23* poems start to preface each book.

Tacchur Brothers: T Singaracharyulu (with the Violin) & *Chinna* Singaracharyulu(with the Tampura)

The *13th* and the longest poem reads thus:

సీ|| ఘనుబురుందరదాసుగడువినుతించినా	"After exalting the great Purandaradasa
రాయణతీర్థురహిదలంచి	Recall the beauty of Narayana Tirtha
క్షేత్రజ్ఞుబుధజనశ్రేష్ఠునిగొనియాడి	Revere Kshetrajna, first amongst the wise
జయదేవువాగ్ఝరిజాలబొగడి	Praise the torrent that is Jayadeva
యనిశమురామదాసునివేడిలీలాశు	Invoke, meditate on Ramadasu
కులకుదీక్షితులకంజలియొనర్చి	Make an offering to Lilasukudu and Dikshitulu
బహువిధగీతప్రబంధవిరచనావి	Recall Sharada Gurumurti
శారదగురుమూర్తిశాస్త్రిదలచి	The skilful writer of many a gita and prabandha
కామాక్షిసత్కృపగాంచినధన్యాత్ము	Praise the ascetic Syama Krishna
శ్యామకృష్ణాభిఖ్యుసన్నుతించి	Fortunate to be blessed by Kamakshi
యభినవనారదుండననెందుమెప్పెడు	Then bow down to Tyagaraja
త్యాగరాజునకువందనమొనర్చి...	Celebrated as Narada incarnate..."

It is in their books that we get our first evidence of the three composers finding a voice together. This poem was probably written by Taccur Singaracharyulu, the older brother. In it we find the three most recent composers, Tyagaraja, Dikshitar and Syama Shastri, who form the primary canon today. We find Kshetrajna, Jayadeva, Ramadasa, Narayana Thirtha and Purandaradasa who come to form a secondary canon. We also see Sharada Gurumurti, praised as 'a talented composer of gitas, prabhandhas and kirtanas' by Subbarama Dikshitar (Dikshitar *1904*, *30*), who more or less drops out of the canon as a figure. Thus, we have the canon of modern-day Carnatic music taking shape in the texts of the Taccur brothers.

It is only much later, in *1905*, that Chinna Singaracharyulu, after the death of his brother, gives us the first articulation of the trinity. In *Gayakasiddhanjanam,* the fifth book, in a section on the lives of musicians, he writes that 'Kshetriyulu, who is considered to be [the] modern originator of Hindu Music.' But goes on to to say that 'Theetchithulu, Thiagarajayya, Syama Sastrulu were the three great masters of music of the age. Each of them made large contributions to Hindu music in the form of Kritis' (Taccur *1905*, *2*). However, in the Telugu version of the text, Kshetrayya is called the 'Bharata-acharya incarnate of today' and not the originator of 'Hindu Music' (ibid, *33*). The trinity are said to have blossomed in this age in the form of 'tri-murtis' (త్రిమూర్తిస్వరూపులైవెలసి) (ibid, *34*). What is significant is that Kshetrayya and the authors of padams are considered the teachers who gave birth to Carnatic music, while the trinity are just great musicians of that lineage. But this link to the devadasi community and the aesthetic of the padams had already started to decline in the writings of these brahmin musicians.

The Taccur brothers' books also sought to create a graded system of musical learning. In contrast, Vina Ramanuja's earlier book acted almost only as reference for lyrics. Their books are a fascinating source for exploring the history of education in Carnatic music. For instance, in their first book *Swaramanjari* we see that the *Pillari Gitams* in Suddha Saveri are taught even today in the same order. We can see them reprinted in A.S Panchapakesa Iyer's *Ganamruthabodhini* (*1953*). In their second book *Gayakaparijatam,* the progression of topics is: Sarali Svaras, Dhatu Varusalu, Alankaramulu, Geethamulu, Tana Varnalu, Dikshitar's Kritis (*36* in number), Syama Shastri's kritis (*8*), Subbaraya Shastri (*7*), Thyagaraja (*25*), Kulashekhara Maharaja (*2*), two tillanas and one mangalam. The progression of basic teaching seems to be consistent with practice today. In fact, some of these elements are to be found in Vina Ramanuja's *1859* book as well, but in terms of content, these books are much closer to present day practice.

Above: Professor P Sambamurthy
Below: AM Chinnaswamy Mudaliar

In fact, even theoretical concepts such as Nadothpathi Vivaranalu, Dasavidha Gamakas, Melakartalu, Tala Dasa Pranas and Rasa Kaumudi in the third book *Sangita Kalanidhi* are found in P. Sambamurthy's musical textbooks of the *1960s*.

In these books, not only do we find the first articulation of the trinity but also glimpses of the standardised form of Carnatic music education that is common today. There are many books that followed a similar pattern, such as TM Venkatesa Sastri's *Sangita Svayambodhi* in Telugu in *1892* (*Musical Self Instructor*), the *Pratamabhyasapustakamu* (*Book for Primary Musical Instruction*) by Subbarama Dikshitar in Telugu in *1905* and the *Prathamasiksha Prakaranam* (*Primary Music Reader*) in Tamil in *1913*. Their stated aim was educative with many of the authors being associated with music schools of the time. In the words of the Taccur brothers, they thought that people who sing without instruction are 'lowly singers swaggering around with bloated conceit' (Taccur *1889*, *1*).

During the time of these publications, A.M. Chinnaswamy Mudaliar decided on presenting *Oriental Music in European Notation* in *1893*. He was dissatisfied with the 'Telugu manuals' (Mudaliar *1893*, *1*) of his day, disparaging them as being inaccessible to a large number of people. He decided to document the compositions of Tyagaraja first, 'the brightest luminary in the musical firmament of Southern India in modern times.' He also mentions Dikshitar and Syama Shastri as contemporaries of Tyagaraja, belonging to different schools (Ibid., *33*). He envisioned his work as among the 'herculean efforts are being made to in every direction to extricate the poor remnants of the above mentioned treasures from the darkness of secrecy and from the labyrinths of intricacy where they are environed' (Ibid., *1*). It is clear that his main goal is to preserve the lineage of Tyagaraja, whose disciple, Krishnaswamy Bhagavatar was his teacher. It is through the publication of this notation and 'with the universal sympathy of the enlightened public both in India and Europe, it is hoped that slowly and surely the object in view will be ultimately obtained' (Ibid., *36*).

L-R Krishnaswamy Bhagavathar, Ramaswamy Bhagavathar, Venkataramana Bhagavathar

Soon after *Oriental Music in European Notation* was published, Subbarama Dikshitar the 'son of Balaswami Dikshitar, the youngest brother of Muthuswami Dikshitar' (Dikshitar *1904, 41*), wrote to Chinnaswamy saying that:

> "I am only too happy to see that the day has come for these to get out of their sacred archives and enjoy a freer and more useful existence. I only wish to add that it would be highly gratifying to me to see that my name is associated with yours in those publications, the originals of which I intend parting with. I shall feel myself highly honoured if this piece of kindness is conceded to me"
> (Mudaliar *1893, 145*)

These letters are published in the reader's responses section of Oriental Music, and we get further information from Subbarama Dikshitar on what happens next. Apparently Subbarama goes for a while to Chennai to help Chinnaswamy to grasp the Venkatamakhin raga system on which his uncle's compositions are modelled on. We also learn that Chinnaswamy worked in the Secretary's office during this time. But in *1899*, due to financial hardships, Chinnaswamy comes to the court of Ettayapuram, where Subbarama was patronised, and requests the king to patronise a publication by Subbarama, if not in staff notation, then in the Telugu script. So begins Subbrama's involvement in the project of notation. But on *21st* December *1901*, Chinnaswamy dies without finishing his book. By *1904*, Subbarama completes the book, *Sangeetha Sampradaya Pradarshini.*

It is *1700* page tome, with a biographical index of *76* musicians, a musicological preface, *229* pieces by Dikshitar, and more than *100*, by others. Subbarama prefaces each raga with instructions on how to explicate it, with a gita and a tana by Venkatamakhin, then with a kirtana by a composer. It is an encyclopaedic project, a book meant for advanced musical study.

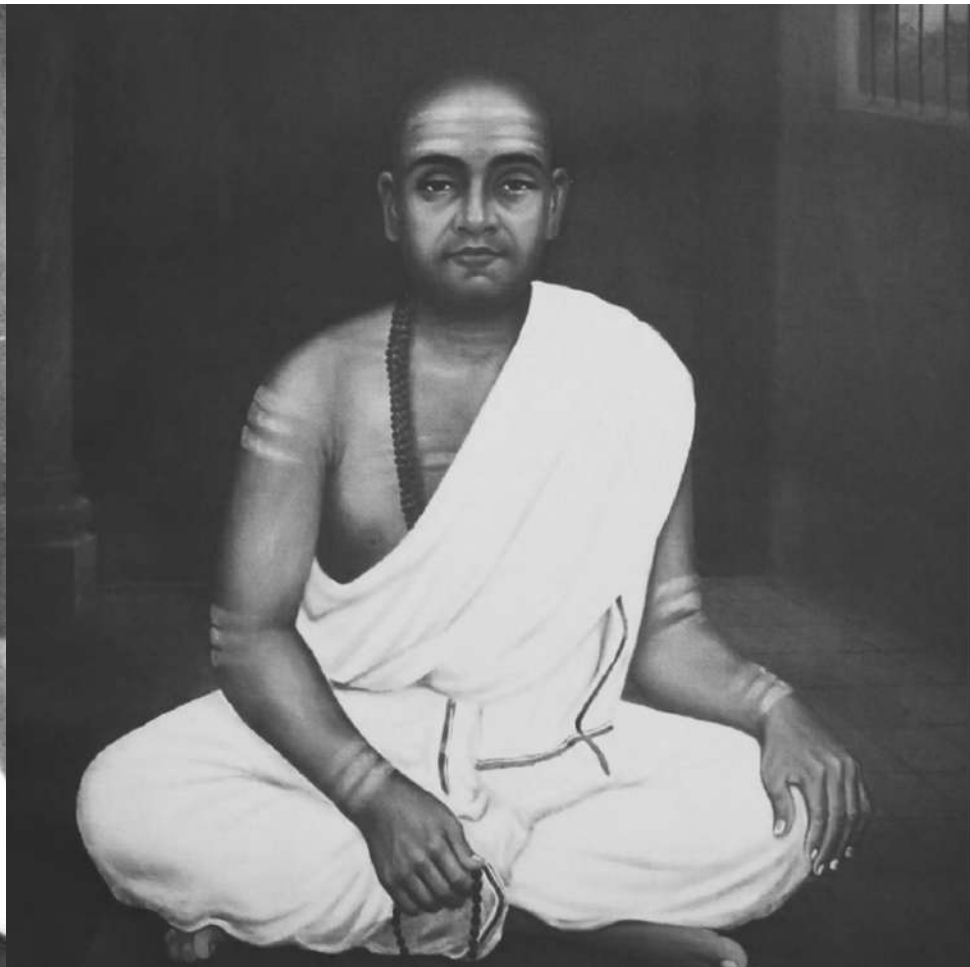
It is important to see that neither Subbarama nor Chinnaswamy aimed for the book to be encyclopaedic or all encompassing. Their two projects ultimately sought to articulate definite aesthetic positions to the students and connoisseurs of Carnatic music. Eventually the *Pradarshini* does what Subbarama says he wants to do in one of his letters to Chinnaswamy. In his letter he mentions that there is a distinction between the concepts of murchana and raga.

"The former" he says, "captures the contours of the musical mode being employed while the latter is only a framework of ascending and descending notes" (Mudaliar *1893, 146*). In each section of the *Pradarshini*, he not only gives the ascending and descending notes of ragas, but also the oft-used phrases which give life to the raga. And of course he articulates the raga in the

Venkatamakhi school, which is by itself different from the other schools.

The aesthetic that Subbarama is propagating through the *Pradarshini* is not an end in itself, but a starting point for musical exploration. We must note that Subbarama and Chinnaswamy did not intend to create an archive of music to draw from. For them, Dikshitar and Tyagaraja are not a part of any trinity and their project was rather to 'extricate' music from the 'sacred archives' through notation lest it be lost (Mudaliar *1893, 1*). They envisioned theirs as a public project, and their work is one of the first such musical articulations in the south of India. In contrast, the Taccur brothers sought to popularise a method of musical education which more broadly exemplified the best from the Thanjavur tradition. While all the three acknowledged their musical debt to the Devadasi and Isai Vellalar communities, their source had already become narrow. They can be understood as the real Trinity for laying the foundations to the modern contours of Carnatic Music.

The Madras Music Academy and other sabhas in the *1930s* played a role in popularising the current idea of the Trinity. The nationalist backdrop against which the sabhas operated is another story. The reason why Chinnaswamy and



Subbarama were afraid that the aesthetic valuations of the past would disappear is also part of this story and a longer one at that, stretching all the way back to the late *18th* century, specifically to the Orientalist, William Jones. Subbarama died in *1906.* The poet Subramania Bharatiyar (brought up and patronised in Ettayapuram) in his elegy to Subbarama wrote that

> "Charity vanished with Karna;
> Poetry with the lofty Kamban
> But with the passing away of the unparalleled Subbaraman,
> Mellifluous music departed"

In a similar wistful tone, Chinnaswamy quotes Thomas Gray

> "Full many a gem of purest ray serene,
> The dark unfathom'd caves of ocean bear:
> Full many a flower is born to blush unseen
> And waste its sweetness on the desert air" (Mudaliar *1893, 34*)

The elegiac tones that these poems take can be read as an anxiety towards losing the repertoire. They believed that it will be lost if others ('the enlightened public') don't notate or follow 'authentic' traditions. These lent impetus to the coming age of canonisation in the *1930s*, when the trinity were enshrined as canon and as an archive of musical sensibility.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Sharmadip Basu, for enthusiastically encouraging me on this project in my undergraduate years. I am grateful to Sathiyavathi for warmly guiding me through the Madras Music Academy Archives in *2018*. Finally, my mother, B Syama Sundari, for vetting my Telugu translations with great care and love.

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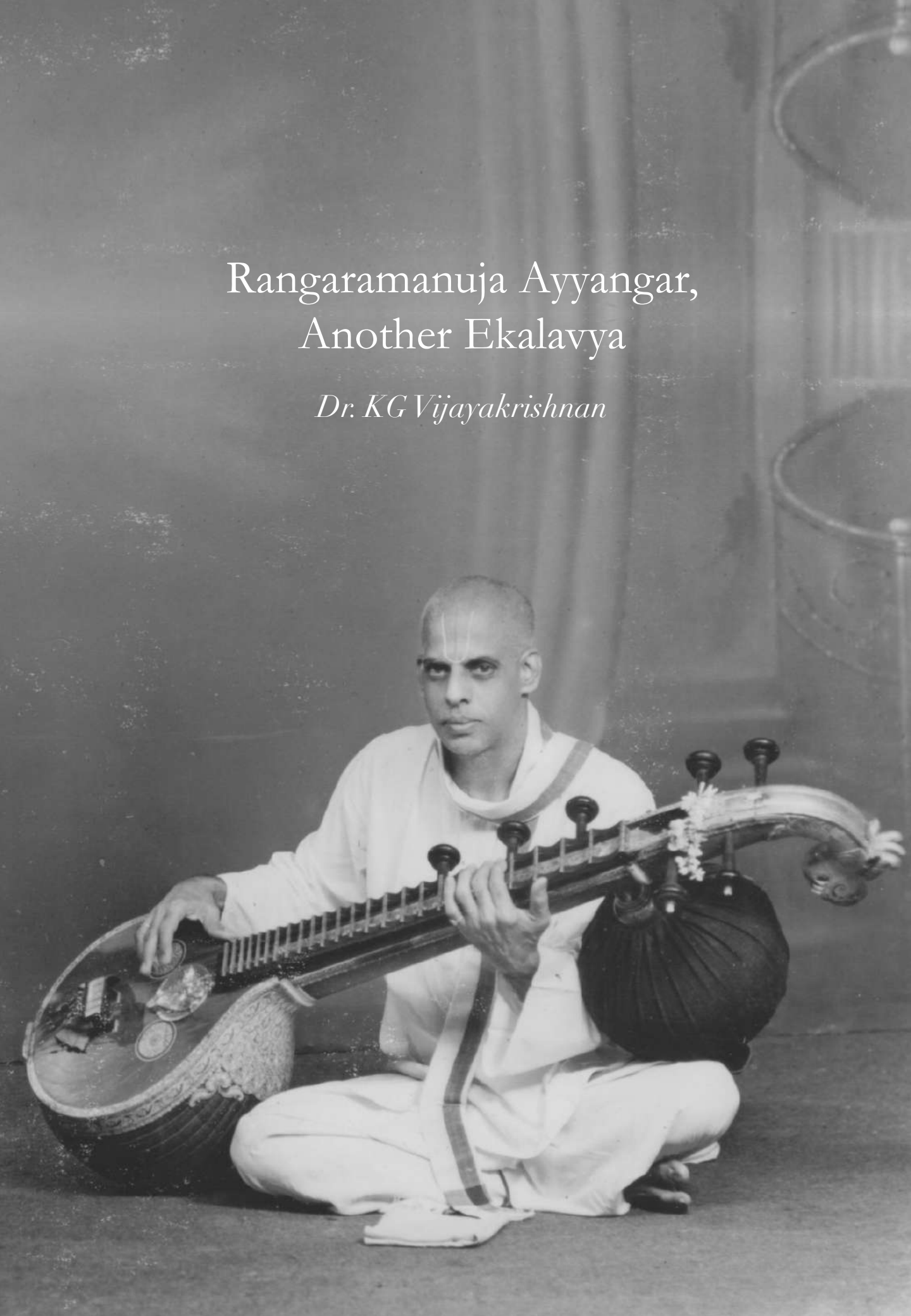
Sangita Kalanidhi by the Taccur Brothers *(1889)*
Gayaka Siddhajanam: Part 2 by the Taccur Brothers *(1905)*
Oriental Music in European Notation by Chinnaswamy Mudaliar *(1893)*
Sangitha Sampradaya Pradarshini: Part 1 by Subbarama Dikshitar *(1904)*

Boddapati Shivanand is doing a Masters' in Modern Indian Studies at Göttingen University. He has learnt Carnatic music for many years and is interested in exploring the relationship between art and society.

Rangaramanuja Ayyangar, Another Ekalavya

Dr. KG Vijayakrishnan



If one mentions the name of Rangaramanuja Ayyangar to many of the senior musicians or rasikas, the first reaction one would notice, if not in public by the more circumspect individuals, in private most probably, is a smug, sneer accompanied by the statement, “oh, to him only Dhanammal’s was music; nothing else mattered”. But this is far from the truth. One just has to look at the list of musicians he was instrumental in having their debuts in Madras in the Sabha he was associated with, namely, Jagannada Bhakta Sabha, then people will realise that Rangaramanuja Ayyangar did have a truly open mind.

He realised the value of the compositions of Purandara Dasa and helped Lalithangi and her daughter Vasantha Kumari in notating them. Similarly, he recognised the greatness of Papanasam Sivan as a composer and helped him bring out the first hundred kritis.

Imagine, a young man with his new wife, who had just migrated to Madras from Mannargudi, who was making a living as a school teacher, who was battling problems in his personal life with the loss of many infants in quick succession being possessed by the magic of Dhanammal's music. It showed him a view of heaven but his thick fingers refused to obey his commands. And he was also a mute witness to many sycophants who would pretend to love Dhanammal's music, pick up pieces from her and then go on to present them shoddily in concert platforms.

When he started teaching the precious legacy he had taken pains to acquire and pass on to the next generation, to my aunts, my mother and some of her contemporaries from the thirties to the fifties. He was a meticulous teacher who would patiently wait for his student to get all the details right before proceeding to the next step. But by the sixties, he was clearly a man in a hurry. He was obsessed with the passage of time and was desperate to pass on the legacy to the coming generations in as short a span of time as possible. So when it came to teaching my cousin (who had started along with me when we were in Chennai), and others (from hearsay), he would teach the pallavi and the anupallavi on the same day and demand that the student learn the charanam on their own and play the entire song, without looking at the book, in the next session. This was an impossibly tall order. The only student who could openly argue with him about his unreasonable demand was me when I used to go him when he

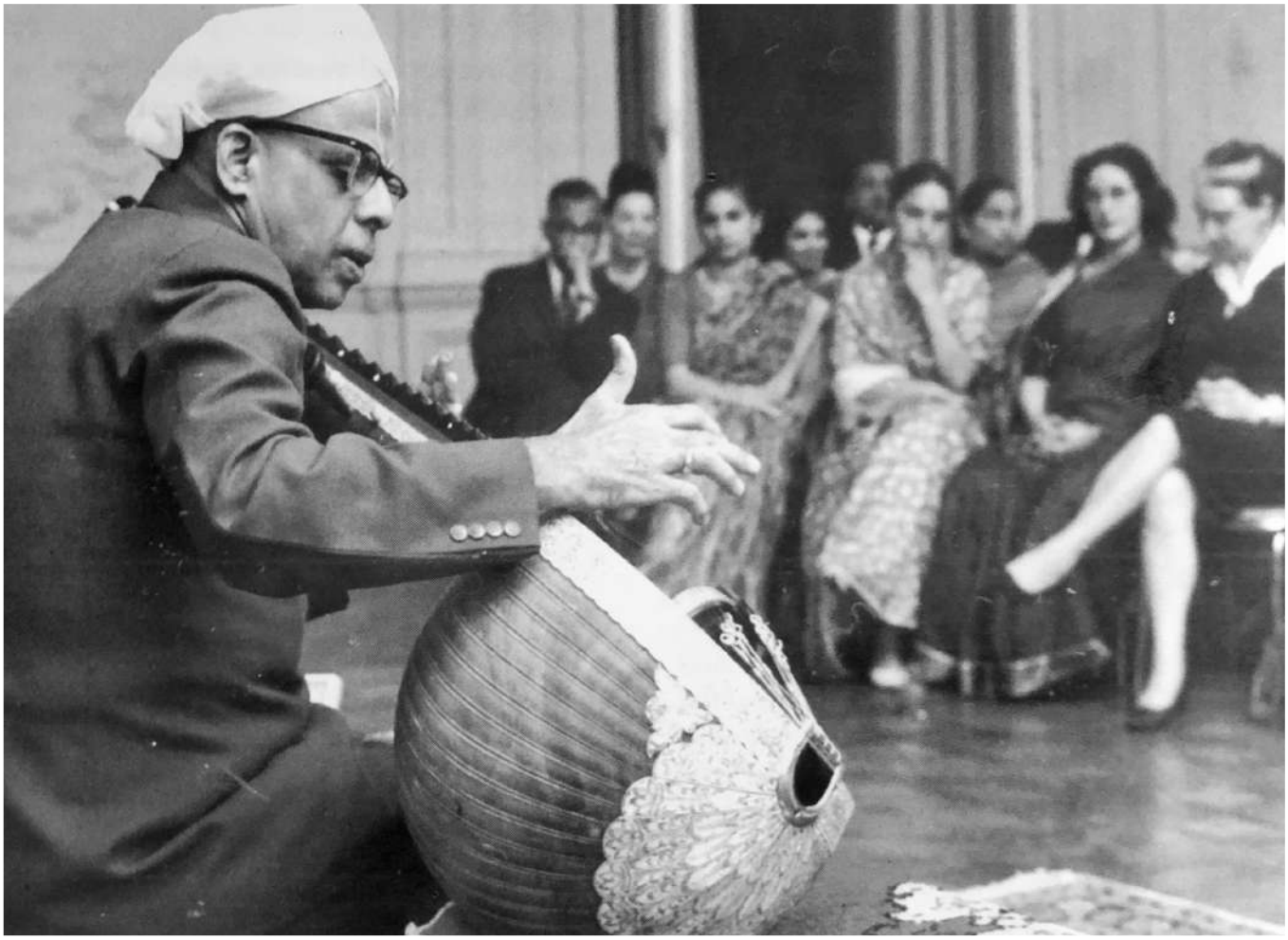
visited Chennai occasionally saying, “I have my college to attend to as well and this is just not possible.” He was taken aback at this open rebellion saying, with a wry smile, “You are as hot headed as your mother.” But he did teach me three gems, patiently, ‘Pahimam ratnachala’/Mukhari, ‘Arunachalanatham’/Saranga and ‘Nirupamanasami’/Behag, repeating each line till I got the details right. His singing of these pieces is still fresh in my memory.

Everyone who had even a passing acquaintance with Rangaramanuja Ayyangar knew that the corner stone of his struggle with Dhanammal's music was his precious jottings which he undertook, either as he was listening to her, or immediately after the session was over, sitting under the street lamp. He was also aware that this was a topic of general merriment, inviting derogatory comments from all those who attended the sessions.

Since those precious notes are lost to the world, let us take a step back to consider what the notes would have looked like. Keeping in mind the facts that:

a) he was already exposed to a lot of good music since his childhood,
b) he had a photographic memory where he had stored a staggering amount of data which were ready for recall at a moment's notice and
c) his one and only aim in making notes of Dhanammal's playing was to capture the essence of her music, her inimitable left hand technique and her style, her subtle innovations improving often heard Paatantara, apart from the surprises in her stock repertoire

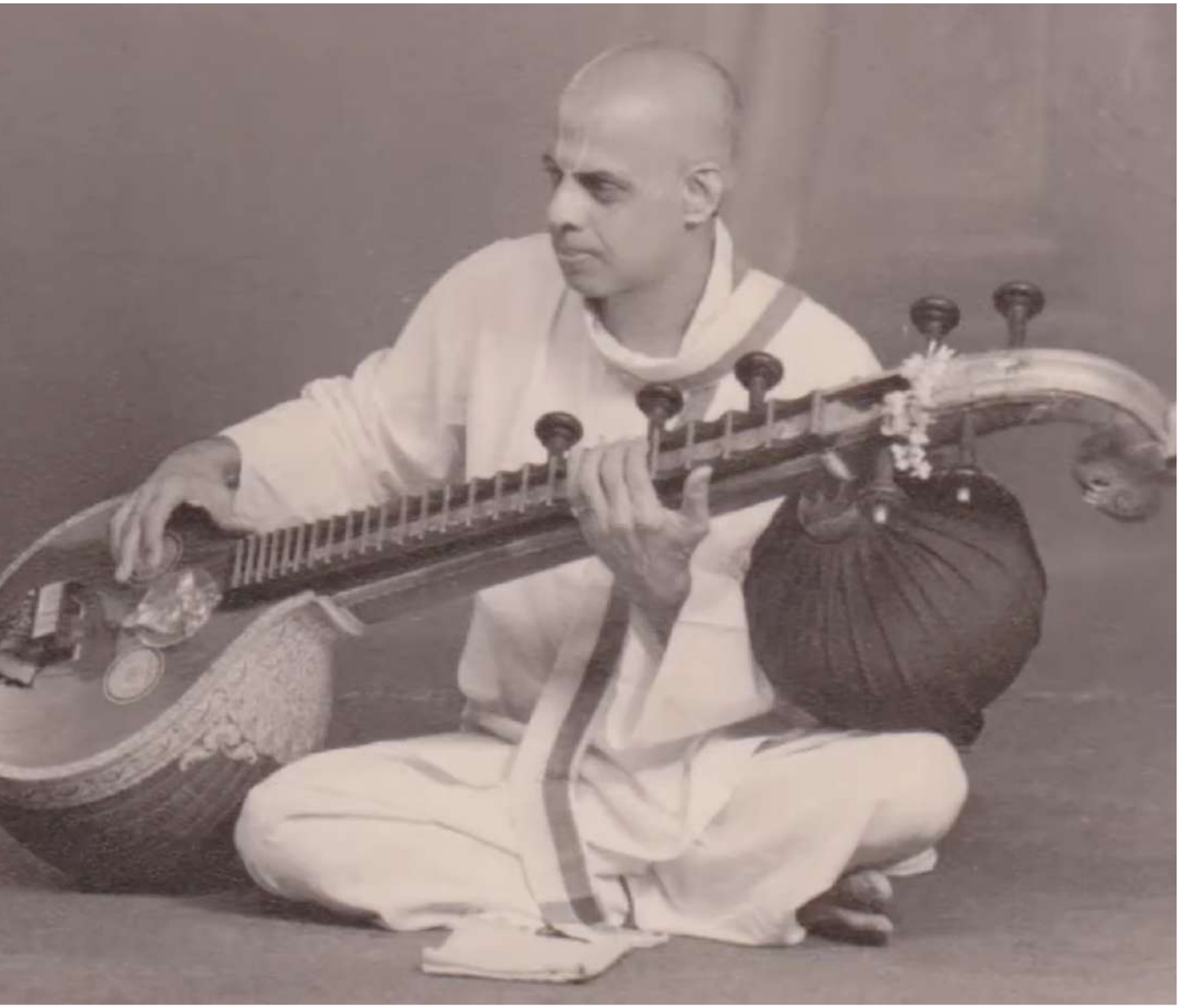
We can hazard a guess as to how he could have gone about the enterprise as I imagine it now. Knowing that her left hand technique was unique, he must have initially concentrated on pieces he already knew well to note down not only the minute differences but also the way she assayed even the familiar music, painstakingly noting down her fingering patterns which resulted in different musical phrasing, musical gamakas. He must have thus painstakingly developed his notational system, step by baby step. Only after this



stage of noting was more or less satisfactorily revealed to him, he would have taken the next step which was to acquire new pieces which he was not familiar with. We do not know what he rendered for that AIR programme which the old lady took great pains to attend. By all accounts we know that it impressed her and, I am certain, because he must have included some pieces exclusive to her repertoire. Just imagine, in a matter of maybe, less than two years, just look at the Javalis and Padams which are, universally claimed to be Dhanamaal's exclusively, he had picked, for which certainly we have documentary evidence in Sri Kriti Mani Malai part IV, and we have a recording of the Padam in raga Devagandhari, which by the way he has notated in the raga Begada in the book. It is clear that what he has passed on to the world is not all the wealth he gleaned from her Friday sessions and the Wednesday sessions in the last two years of her life.

Rangaramanuja Ayyangar with his daughter Padma Vardhan

He had discovered this technique when he was past his youth. And his fingers being thick set, he had an extremely tough time learning this technique. The technique looks simple but it is difficult as it requires dexterity in both the left forefinger and middle finger as independent entities. Having taken so much pains to learn it, he was disappointed when his students tried to cut corners or take the easy way out. Above all, the last word in musical taste to him was his revered Dhanammal and if a student dared to make independent choices, which according to him didn't go with this her style, he could get very caustic. He had heard reports of my concert for the T Nagar Arts Academy in the early seventies, and he wrote a strongly worded letter expressing his disappointment in no uncertain terms. But I am glad when I performed at the Music Academy in *1975*, he and Mami flew all the way from Bombay, and he was quite happy with my playing, and he blessed me.



Rangaramanuja Ayyangar: Another Ekalavya

Vaak's first documentary, directed and produced by Shreeraam Shankar, is on the life of the musician and scholar Rangaramanuja Ayyangar. This year also marks Ayyangar's *120th* birth anniversary and we are grateful for the opportunity to document his life and music. Special thanks to Dr. KG Vijayakrishnan, Sriram Venkatakrishnan, Aruna Sairam, Anil Srinivasan, Aishwarya Vidhya Raghunath & Ashwath Naroth for making this documentary happen for us.

Production: Vaak
Concept, Direction & Editing: Shreeraam Shankar
Coordination: Arvind Kumar Sankar
Naration: Dr. K G Vijayakrishnan
Script & Screenplay: Lashman Premi
Music: Kshitija Varadan & Vipanci Trust
Location: Asvah *24*

DISCOGRAPHY

Another Ekalavya | Trailer, Promo *1*, Promo *2*

Rangaramanuja Ayyangar

Padams Concert

Raga Hamirkalyani | Manamu leda | Tyagaraja | Adi

Raga Sankarabharanam | Sankaracharyam | Subbarama Dikshitar | Adi

Dr. KG Vijayakrishnan

Raga Dhanyasi | Paradevatha | Muthuswamy Dikshitar | Adi

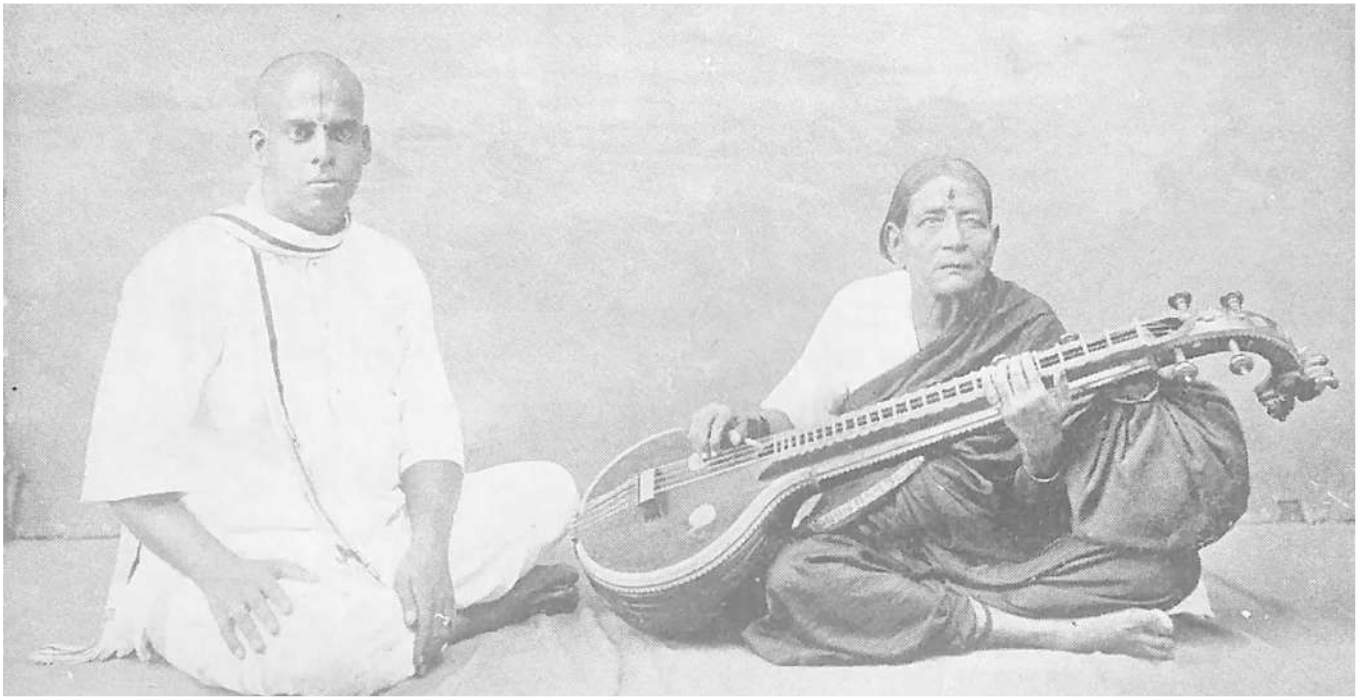
Raga Darbari Kaanada | Vahati malaya sameere | Adi

Raga Darbar | Meena nayana | Subbaraya Sastri | Rupakam

K. G. Vijayakrishnan, the youngest son of Shrimati Karpagavalli and Shri Gopalakrishnan, learnt veena from his mother who was a student of the eminent musicologist Ranga Ramanuja Ayengar. He began his career as a lecturer in English Literature in Madurai and continued his highHer studies at CIEFL, currently named the English and Foreign Languages University doing his PHD in phonology and retired from its faculty as 'Senior Professor' in 2017.He had continued to cultivate his music as a non-professional passion performing in India as well as abroad. The highlight of his academic endeavour was the publication of his book "the Grammar of Carnatic Music", Mouton de Gruyter, Germany which allowed him to combine his twin passions of 'the science of sound' , phonology and music. E devotes his time solely to music trying to propagate the hard earned legacy of the legendary Veena Dhanammal's style of music.

Another

EKALAVYA



My experiments with the Mridangam

Sumesh Narayanan

How much space can fusion take in Carnatic music?

as much space as the mind can take really. To me, it's like conveying a message in a different language from the one commonly spoken, or sometimes even using a different vocabulary. The idea of interpreting musical thoughts through different forms and genres facilitates a deeper understanding of the emotion on many occasions. Although that need not be the sole motive, music may very well be fused and mixed purely for music's sake and requires no validation whatsoever.

In Carnatic music, I've always marvelled at the intricacies it carried in theory and the nuanced technique with each progressive stage as a practitioner. For many centuries, the art-form that we now call Carnatic music has been a way of life for many. It has in it a strong sense of realism and awareness. This deeper sense is probably what shaped the art form to accept and accommodate many foreign ideas into its own, making it that much more vast and profound. If not, we would never have had Dikshitar's nottuswarams, or ragas that were borrowed from the Hindustani realm or even contemporary compositions from the previous century. Experimentation and exchange of ideas only intensify one's understanding of the core elements and opens new avenues to assimilating ideas from the other.

So, why do I experiment?

In recent times, I have been experimenting quite a bit with presenting my music. I have always wanted to widen my understanding by trying out new things. I think I'm innately adventurous and ridiculously inquisitive. I've often wondered if creative methods could transcend activities. I am also an avid woodworker, albeit a beginner, and I have started paying attention to my creative methods while writing a song or composing a tune and noticing how it changes or evolves when I create art with wood.

Would I be able to make a wooden piece of art using the same creative methods I follow while making a song? Are there any striking similarities in patterns and how do I better see them? My methods become rather vivid in this venture, thrusting me deeper into understanding my capacity. Making furniture, on the other hand, is quite different as there are specific concepts like form and function that steer you substantially. But art is an embodiment of expression and the medium, merely a transference. I say this because no artist or medium is above the art-form itself. No medium is superior or inferior to another but in fact, is as glorified as the feeling it induces. Even in my music, while my experimental zone stimulates imagination and creativity, the

traditional Carnatic training equips me with the capacity to sort of subsuming any new concepts with what is known. On many occasions, I have even encountered a sudden realization about a certain Carnatic concept or a Kriti that would have been a result of an experimental venture. I think that is also quite evident in a fusion venture. When you present a song or a tune in an uncommon manner, the newer elements don't take away but rather give more to the core element. The aesthetics and dynamics are preserved, sometimes highlighted, and are quite often embellished too.

Digitisation and Carnatic music

The art of presentation has always been evolving and is quite often tailored to suit a variety of contexts. This too could be construed as an experimental pursuit. Today, we are finding new avenues to present music and there also seems to be a rapidly growing interest to globalize it as well, now more than ever. As an example, have you felt why the recordings from old concerts, despite their quality, sounded complete and had so much character in them?

Sumesh playing the Mridangam.
PC: Jagadeesh

Indosoul
Reshwin Nishith - Bass, Sumesh Narayanan - Percussion, Karthick Iyer - Violin, Ramkumar Kanakarajan - Drums, Vikram Vivekanand - Guitar

Welcome to when analog ruled the world.

When we capture a sound in a way that represents all the possible frequencies, we are recording in analog; when we use computers to translate the sound into a series of numbers that approximate what we hear, we are recording in digital. Now, that's precisely what the olden days' stalwarts were recording into - the old spools and LP records, even many celebrated bands from the west. But don't get me wrong, I am not against digitalization at all. Digital sound is probably the biggest advancement in sound technology that facilitated a world of possibilities and set trends ever since. Today we listen to many records from the *1960s* because we were able to digitalize and preserve them forever. And in that regard, the role of digital sound or recording music in digital formats simplifies the process greatly and is readily accessible. But as for live concert performances, I wonder if Carnatic music ever needed that level of amplification to the extent where the innate dynamics and character of the art-form is compromised more often than not. But I guess that is the struggle there as well, the struggle to find balance.

Perumal and Providence

In 'Perumal and Providence', my latest work along with Ravi G, we have tried to explore my fascination with experimental soundscapes. It all started when Aditya (Aditya Balasundaram - Project Advisor, Perumal & Providence) wanted to make an album full of Perumal kritis and pasurams. Initially, we had decided to record *12* kritis and about *20* pasurams. Aditya also had this interesting idea of having one pasuram as part of every kriti apart from the *20* pasurams that were planned as a stand-alone presentation. As we moved into the recording started, we started to realize that *12* kritis in an album was a considerable amount of time for any listener to listen to in one go. As a consequence, we decided to split the entire album into *3* volumes to provide some sort of relief. Since the kritis were going to be categorized within the album, we decided to present them in as many ways as we possibly could, and hence came the idea of fusion and experimentation.

As it stands now, Volume *1* comprises Amalanadhipiran & Thirunedunthandakam (*10* pasurams each), Volume *2* is six kritis in the traditional Carnatic presentation, and Volume *3* mixes it up by placing six krithis in experimental soundscapes. With the album being predominantly instrumental, it was sheer bliss to use many incredible instruments to take the lead in the kriti rendition, a trend that seems to be in decline in recent times.

To speak of experimentation, the biggest revelation was the idea of two different elements coming together to convey a common expression in a way that neither element is treated or considered exclusive of the other. In my opinion, that balance is the hardest to achieve. I have had instances where the main element, in this case, Carnatic music loses its placement because of the imbalance between the elements in an experimental venture. It is quite a task because even though one can hone the ear to listen to only what one wants, it can work against one's control too when there is a strong imbalance, as the foreign elements start to invade the space of the primary element. The concept of adding soundscapes to complement the expression and the aesthetic of the kritis was the sole motive behind the third Volume.

Focusing on the pasurams from Volume *1* and Volume *3*, their treatment was going to be quite different even though we dealt with the same kind of form and structure. In volume *1*, both the pieces comprise of *10* pasurams. These are sung in a multitude of ragas tuned by Bharat (Sundar) and Ashwath (Narayanan). We also believe we made history with Amalanadhipiran as it is being musicalized for the first time ever. In my opinion, the most important

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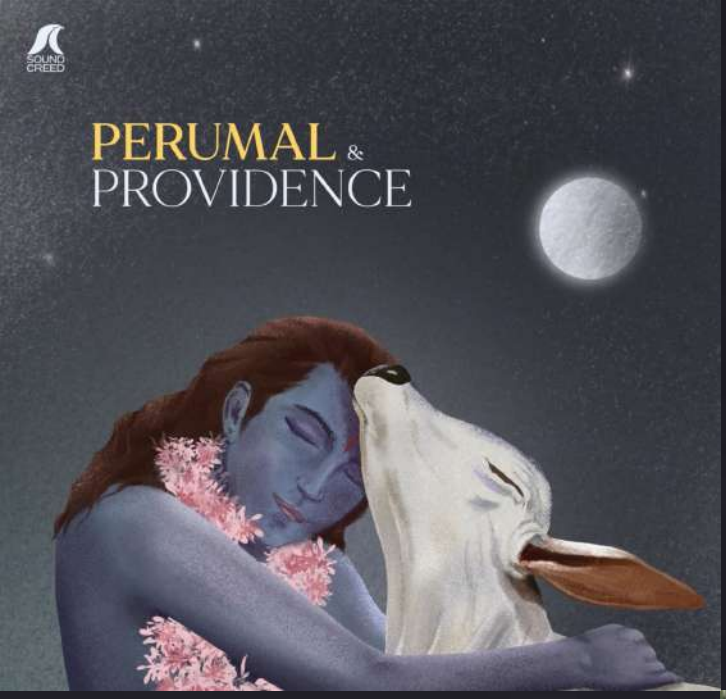
Perumal & Providence cover. Album Artwork designed by Gowrishankar Vankatraman



Volume 1

Amalanadhipiran

Thirunedundathakam

Volume 2

Kaarubaaru

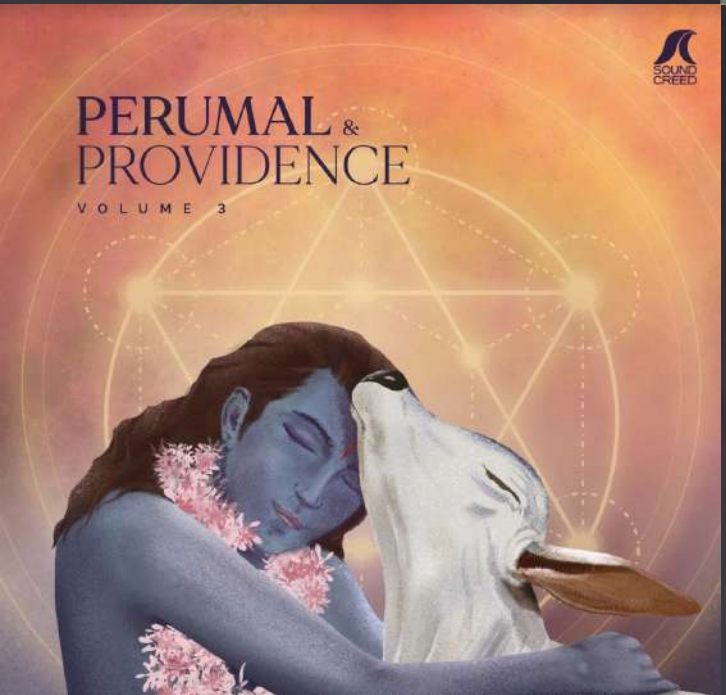
Balagopala

Endu daginado

Bhakti Bhiksha

Nannubrovamani cheppave

Srirajagopala



Volume 3

Chakkani Raja

O Ranga Sayee

Alarulu Kuriyaga

Soundararajam

Mundu Venuga

Aakati Velala

element in Volume *1* was the way we treated the transitions between the pasurams. Along with Sayee's (Sayee Rakshith) brilliance and Ravi's impeccable ear for context, we were able to make the transition seem contextual yet subtle so that the following pasuram did not sound undermined. On the contrary, the pasurams formed part of the kritis in the third volume and had to be a part of the kriti itself without seeming disjointed.

For the most part (of Volume *3*), we had the pasurams precede the kritis in a Virutham style, and some of it even had Bharat and Ashwath sing it in a dense choral arrangement. We had so much fun exploring the various places in the kritis where the pasurams could be placed and for example, is what led to having the pasuram be where it is in 'O Rangasayee'/Kambhoji. We simply could not think of anything that could come before Rama's (L Ramakrishnan) violin starting the kriti, which led to Ravi's interesting idea of positioning the pasuram uniquely before the charanam and it sounded so beautiful! The idea for the *3*rd volume also extended to Perumal being envisioned in different roles in life, sealing the direction of the sound that we had to take. That is the reason behind the grand regal introduction in 'Chakkani raja'/Karaharapriya, the calming subtle strings in 'O Rangasyee', the contemplative and evolving percussion in 'Soundararajam'/Brindavana Saranga, the indie/live arrangement in Alarulu kuriyaka, the contemporary riffs in Mundu venuka and the dramatic interludes in Akati velala.

We had the privilege of involving many incredible artists in the album and especially in Volume *2*, where the kritis are presented in a straightforward manner. I cannot express my gratitude to them enough, and this album is also the most I am thankful for during the lockdown.

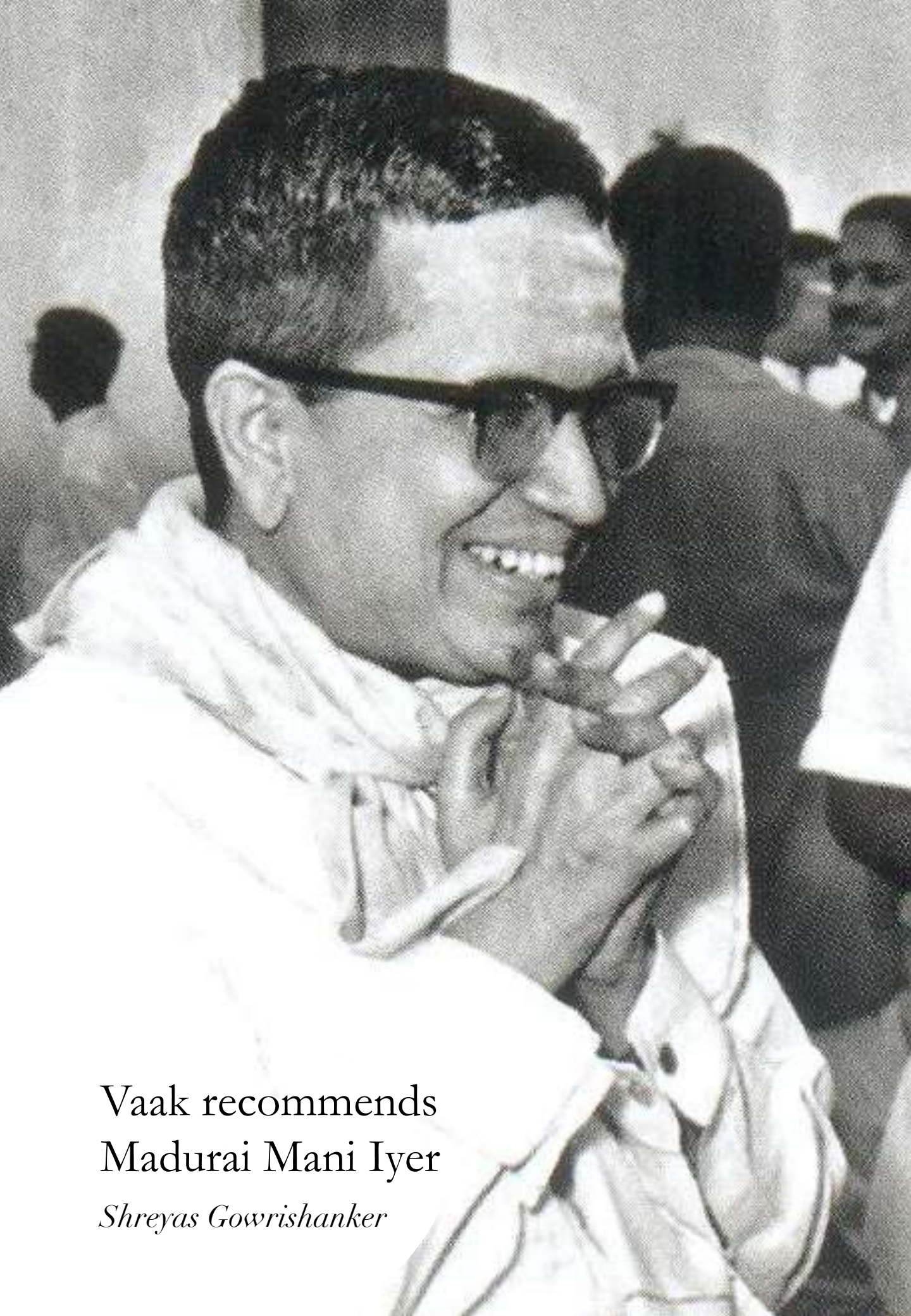
DISCOGRAPHY

Sumesh Narayanan's YouTube Channel

IndoSoul Live YouTube Channel

Perumal and Providence: Vol *1*, Vol *2*

Sumesh Narayanan is a Mridangam artist based out of Madras. He has trained under the Mridangam Maestro Sri Thiruvaarur Bakthavathsalam for 21 years now. He has accompanied many eminent and upcoming Carnatic musicians. He is also a member of the band Indosoul and is one of the Directors at Sound Creed.



Vaak recommends Madurai Mani Iyer

Shreyas Gowrishanker

Vaak hosted its second listening session on the music of Madurai Mani Iyer. In collaboration with Shreyas Gowrishanker, we have put together an extended discography from our session

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Raga Kedaragowla Pannen unakkana poojai Viruttam

Kedaragowla is a raga that holds a special status in the Carnatic music. Being one of the ragas that has no discernible Hindustani equivalent, it is exclusively and entirely Carnatic. Thus, it occupies a special place in many a listener's heart.

This particular recording is a very special one because it remains the only recording of Sangitha Kalanidhi Madurai Mani Iyer (MMI) singing the raga Kedaragowla. It is a snippet of a Thayumanavar passage ("Pannen Unnakana Poojai") that is rendered as a virutham. MMI's rendition takes the raga to new heights as he combines tried and tested phrases with certain novel phrases. The highlight of this virutham is the incorporation of a phrase:

RR MM NN RR MGS

This phrase is one that is not commonly seen in the raga Kedaragowla. Yet, MMI's rendition of it is filled with bhavam, finesse and most importantly, it is unmistakably Kedaragowla.

Raga Kambhoji Ragam tanam pallavi

Kambhoji is a raga that has been dealt with extensively by all the great musicians of today and the yester-years. Yet, Madurai Mani Iyer's rendition of this raga is one to cherish. MMI's pencil sketch like rendition of Kambhoji occurs mainly in the tharasthayi and it captures the complete essence of the regal raga. The build-up to the tharasthayi panchamam is exhilarating and nothing short of masterful. The pallavi, rendered at a madhyama kalam pace, aesthetically blends with the presentation as a whole. He concludes the rendition with ragamalika swaras in ragas Behag and Kaanada respectively. Despite the madhyama kalam tempo, the ragas are beautifully portrayed without any ambiguity. A point to note in this rendition occurs during his rendition of Kaanada. In his first encounter with the swara D, MMI

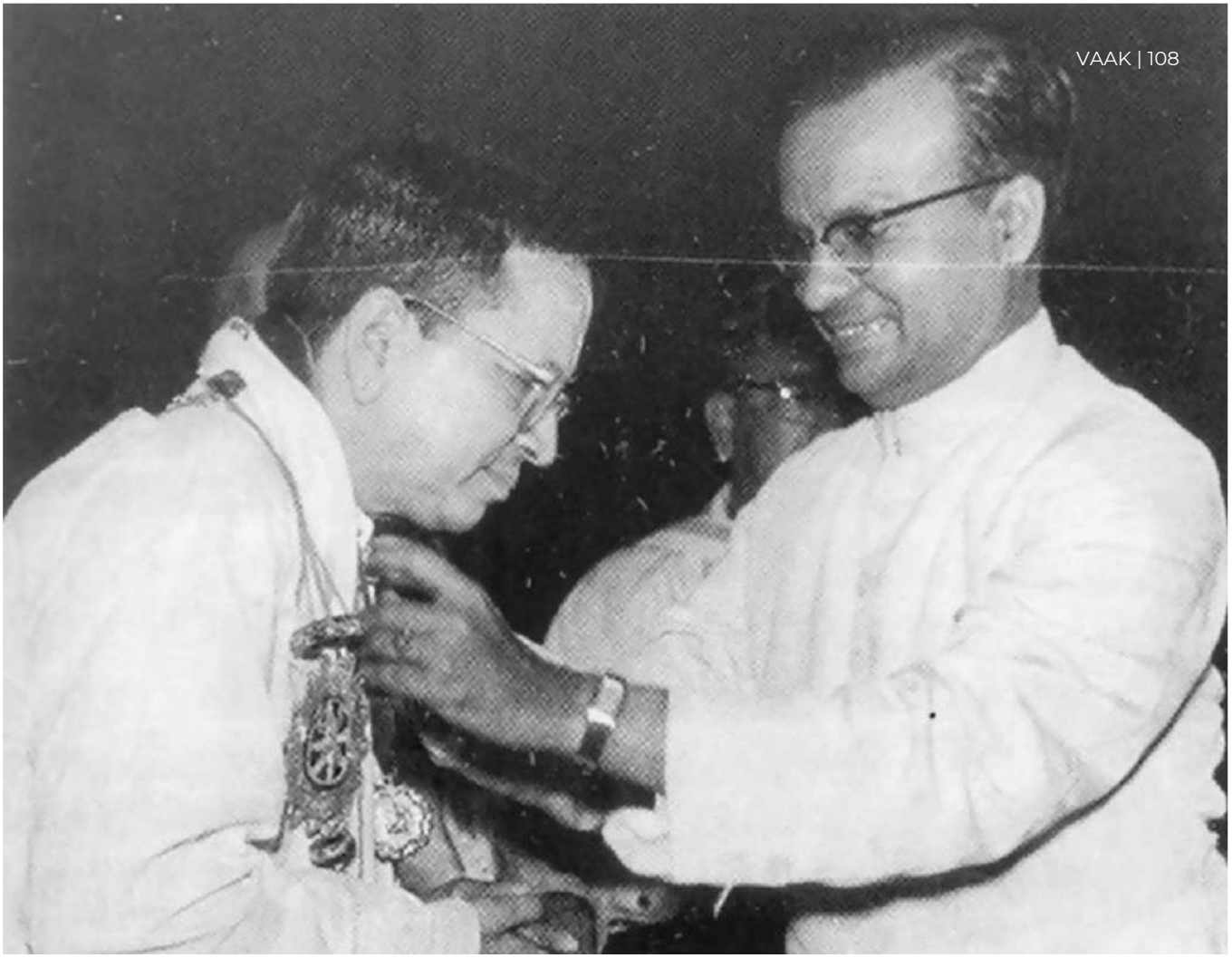
teeters into the shuddha dhaivatham, which is a swara that is not present in the raga Kaanada. Despite being a point of contention in the realm of technicalities, the addition of the anya swara gives an interesting flavour to the already splendid rendition.

Raga Bhairavi Viriboni Varnam

One of the most popular varnams, Viriboni in raga Bhairavi is perhaps the most tried and tested varnam of all time. According to Dr.S.A.K. Durga (A disciple of Madurai Mani Iyer), MMI generally did not present varnams in concerts as he believed that they were meant for practice only. But that did not stop him from rendering Viriboni in his own style and leaving his mark by tagging it with his inimitable swaraprastharam.

Perhaps the most brilliant thing about this rendition is his staunch commitment to the kalapramanam. While adherence to kalapramanam is a standard held highly by MMI, it is exemplified in his kalpananswara rendition. Finally, his usage of plain notes introduces a brand new dimension to raga Bhairavi.

Madurai Mani Iyer with Rajamanickam Pillai & Palani Subramaniam Pillai, 1954.



Madurai Mani Iyer receiving the Sangeetha Kalanidhi from JC Mathur (Director General, AIR) in the year 1959

Raga Saraswati Manohari Entha vedukondu Neraval

The raga Saraswathi Manohari is often dealt with as what is in common parlance known as a filler raga. Generally, this composition is sung as a quick piece in between elaborate renditions. It was, however, brought into the spotlight by two legends of Carnatic music: Musiri Subramanya Iyer and Madurai Mani Iyer. Akin to his elaboration of raga Kapinarayani, the nereval is almost a plunge into the darkness in hopes of finding a gem. The plunge is proven worthy as this nereval has stood the test of time as perhaps one of the best approaches to what many would call a minor raga.

The alapana is infused with rakthi and can be used as a wonderful example to understand the raga. Enough praises cannot be uttered about MMI's swaraprasthara. Never before seen sarvalaghu swara patterns flash by in an exhilarating yet controlled kalapramanam. This rendition is a testament to MMI's ability to infuse rakthi and life into any raga, be it major or minor.

Raga Surutti Angarakam

Madurai Mani Iyer is known for many attributes and contributions. One of his contributions is his detailed renditions of all of Muthuswamy Dikshitar's Navagraha krithis. The crown jewel of his Navagraha krithi rendition is his explorative rendition of Angarakam in raga Suruti. The D swara in Suruti is generally not sung as a standalone note and is always sung as an extension of the N. However, there exists certain contexts where the static position of D is employed. The alapana and kalpana swara of MMI for Angarakam is a masterclass in the use of D in raga Suruti. He employs the static D in numerous phrases and locations, yet at no point is the sound of Suruti compromised. The raga is beautifully explored using what one would consider a uncommon phrase. Additionally, the rendition of Dikshitar's magnum opus is done brilliantly in MMI's inimitable style.

Raga Senjurutti Vaidehi Sahitham Viruttam

Madurai Mani Iyer is known today as one of the greatest musicians India has ever produced and his music is often described as a music for connoisseurs and laymen alike. However, an often undiscussed point was his relationship with his co-musicians. During an era when the accompanying artists were entirely subservient to the main artist, MMI cultivated a relationship that was not at all based on hierarchy. His enjoyment of the violinist and the mridangam player's music is palpable, even in the recordings that we can listen to today. Conversely, the violinist in his concerts often feel liberated and this freeness is beautifully obvious. This rendition of a virutham in raga Senjurutti is an excellent depiction of the aforementioned points. MMI's generous application of the lower G in his rendition is beautifully reflected and built upon by Lalgudi G. Jayaraman. Also, MMI's expressions of enjoyment almost seem to invigorate LGJ. Additionally, MMI's very different way of enunciating the syllables adds a new aesthetic flavour to the exposition.

Madurai Mani Iyer at Sri Ramaseva Mandali Trust, Chamarajpet, Bangalore. TS Vembu Iyer is on Tampura.

Shreyas Gowrishanker is an upcoming Carnatic vocalist. He has learnt from Smt.Uma Kumar, Smt.Vidya Srikanth. Currently, he is training under Dr.Subba Narasiah & Vid.R.K.Sriramkumar. He studies Physics at Concordia University, Montreal.

SREE RAMASEVA

Incense burner in the form of a lion

South Asia, India, Deccan

15th century

Dimensions : 17.46 x 13.97 x 6.67 cm

With curving horns and bulging eyes, this vessel is cast in the form of a mythical lion known as a yali. A persistent motif with protective associations in South Asian art, the yali can be found in Jain painting and Hindu sculpture for example, the nearby relief of the goddess Chamunda. On this bronze figure, the yali merges with a traditionally Islamic form the animal-shaped incense burner. Placed within the yali's hollow body, burning incense would have been covered by a back lid (missing), forcing the perfumed smoke to exit through the open mouth and the holes ringing the chest like a necklace.

"Incense burner in the form of a lion , 1964.44," Harvard Art Museums collections online, Apr 26, 2021, https://hvrd.art/o/216562 ,

For curated music

VAAK

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